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**Confronting Modernity:  
Dialectical Images of Post Revolutionary/ Post Cold War Addis Ababa**

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**A Thesis  
In  
The Department  
Of  
Communication Studies**

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## **Abstract**

### **Confronting Modernity: Dialectical Images of Post Revolutionary/ Post Cold War Addis Ababa**

This thesis takes issue with Ethiopian Studies (stuck as it is in an Orientalist-Semiticist paradigm) as well as acultural models for theorizing modernity and development. Rather, this thesis seeks to build a method that can shed light on the conditions of possibility of modern Ethiopia, especially in the post-revolutionary period (1974). This thesis has found that following Walter Benjamin's notion of dialectical images is the best way to go about building this kind of a method. As such, it attempts to build dialectical images of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. Further, the confrontation of modernity with the local, as discerned in these images is read as emblematic of a larger process of what Ethiopia is currently confronted with as it attempts to become more modern and more developed.

The idea that modernity is dead or on the contrary that it never arrived in the "periphery" (two sides of the same coin) is left to rest in the popular literature. Rather, it is the point of this thesis to show that modernity's story, far from being over, may just now be reaching its apex.

## Acknowledgments

This thesis has been an exercise in call and response. First and foremost it has been a way to listen to the abiding presence of my recently deceased aunt, Ruphael Imru who taught me that poetic thinking and analytic thinking are not separable; Zeleke Bekele who took me for walks through the streets of Addis Ababa; Elleni Imru who read Byron to me; and to friends and relatives scattered throughout the various third world countries I have called home. Big up, especially to the Courida Park posse, two shots!!

Big thanks to Dr Solomon Ali at the Ministry of Information and Culture in Ethiopia. Dr Solomon loosened many bureaucratic ropes on my behalf and facilitated my research in numerous other ways. Thanks also to Fekadeh Woldefrash, fellow flaneur and drinking buddy, who toured me through the in-between spaces of Addis Ababa, and to the Gojam crew at UAA for passing contacts, information and good wit on to me.

Extra big thanks to my sister, Libby Zeleke who unconditionally supported me as I taught my *self* to enjoy my *symptoms*. Many other people fed me, gave me money and provided shelter while I was writing this thesis. They are: Laiwan Chung; Fanaye Wolde-Giorghis; Andrew Forster; Alem-Seged Heruy; Dereje Zeleke; Monique Tamrat and Bo Myers. Thanks also to Lisa Uddin and Joel McKim for stimulating friendships.

Much gratitude extended to Peter C. van Wyck for going beyond the call of duty and providing great thesis supervision. Peter's willingness to engage, correspond and remain silent when appropriate (even if it irritated me at the time) pushed me to write a thesis that is all I imagined it could be and more. Thanks also to Kim Sawchuk whose early words of encouragement made all the difference and to Brian Massumi for agreeing to read my thesis on such short notice.

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### **Note on the use of Amharic Words, Names and Dates.**

There does not seem to be an agreed upon method for the rendering of Amharic and Ge'ez words into English. As a result I have chosen to use the most popular rendering of an Amharic word rather than invent a new system. When quoting an author that differs from the popular form I have kept the author's form.

Ethiopians do not have last names. The name attached to a person's first name is their father's first name. One is addressed by their title and their first name. For example one would call me, Ms Elleni, etc. No one is ever called by their father's first name. In my citations list I have attempted to respect this naming system.

The official calendar of Ethiopia is the Julian Calendar. I have converted all dates (hopefully correctly) to the Gregorian Calendar.



**Fig. 1 Reference Map of Ethiopia (prior the 1974 Revolution)** in *Venture: Rural Development in Ethiopia*, map. (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Information, 1972) 2.

## **Introduction**

One afternoon in 1997 I indulged in what was for me a very unusual activity: I hung out with some friends on a street corner of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. It was unusual that I would partake in such an activity, for in 1989, the last time I had been in Ethiopia, a Marxist military junta governed the country; a mid-night to Five AM curfew was in place and the fear of arrest for being a reactionary (or any other convenient label) seemed to be everywhere. Moreover, young people feared that they could be forcibly recruited for service on either side of a war between the military junta and rebel groups struggling to overthrow the junta.

The Marxist military junta I am referring to governed Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. It rose to power during the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 and was able to sustain its hold on government due to the massive Soviet aid that was thrown its way from the mid 1970's until the end of the 1980's. In 1991 the military junta fell, in large part as a result of the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Returning to Ethiopia in 1997, I was therefore curious to see how the end of the cold war had impacted the country. Hanging out on a street corner of Addis Ababa proved instructive.

On that afternoon in 1997, while I was hanging out on the street corner with my friends, a group of British NGO workers on a tour of the city walked by. Not understanding English, one of my friends was unable to discern where the “farengoch” (foreigners) were from. Tellingly, he turned to me and said, “look at those foreigners, over there are your Russian friends”. “But”, I said laughingly, “the Russians left years ago and anyway I don’t live in Russia”. My friend responded with a confused look that said: Canada, America, Russia, they appear the same to me. The exchange between my

friend and I was telling because for my friend the British literally *were* Russian. Thus, despite Francis Fukuyama's triumphant tones with regard the end of the cold war, and despite the fact that in the West, an overall feeling of relief accompanied the disappearance of the Iron Curtain, for one young man whose life must have been most dramatically effected by the cold war, there had been no post cold war transition at all.

In 1997, I also had the opportunity to view Haile Garima's tremendously moving documentary film *Imperfect Journey*. The film starts off with Garima journeying from Addis Ababa to Gondar (in Northern Ethiopia), the city of his birth (as well as mine). Garima wants to know how the people have endured the Marxist junta and what people think about the new post cold war regime. Traveling on the road from Addis Ababa to Gondar, Garima comes across school children, farmers, widows and families with disappeared children and asks, for example: do you remember the bombs that went off here? And where were you when such and such an event happened? From these simple questions Garima collects memories of life under the junta and under the present post-cold war regime.

Towards the end of the film Garima returns to Addis Ababa to talk with activists and academics. In these discussions Garima places the memories he has collected within a context of Pan Africanism and the movement to create better living conditions for all African peoples. The Ethiopian Revolution, for Garima, was one answer to the questions and issues articulated by Pan Africanism. Today, Garima asks, given what we know, how does one address these still relevant issues?

For Garima it was not enough to simply let the memories he had collected speak for themselves. Indeed on their own the memories say very little. Garima's film is

successful at mobilizing an affective response because (through interviewing activists and academics) he is able to situate the memories he collected as being produced within social relations.

One of the key points to emerge out of Garima's ability to situate the memories he had collected is that over the past fifty years Ethiopian governments specifically, and African governments in general (whether in their communist or capitalist variety) have had a blind faith in the concepts of development and modernization. The film therefore ends on a somewhat pessimistic note, acknowledging that in Ethiopia such a faith has only led and can only lead to a fire that will consume the very people that ignited it.

Instructed by my experiences on the street corner of Addis Ababa and affected by the wisdom offered in Garima's film, in 1997, I also began to wonder how it would be possible to extend Garima's analyses, and deepen his account of the continued hardships of the Ethiopian people.

One thing that was clear to me right from the beginning was that returning to the usual offerings put forward by theories of development and modernization would be insufficient for getting at what was happening in Ethiopia. It seemed that these discourses brought with them a whole heap of assumptions about what it meant to be a self, to be human, to have an identity, etc — assumptions that in the end got in the way of unravelling the complexity of the Ethiopian situation. However, as time went on it also became clear to me that the field of Ethiopian Studies dominated as it is by an Orientalist-Semiticist paradigm differed little from the afore-mentioned discourses in its ability to attend to a situation on the ground.

## Ethiopianist Discourse

Ethiopian Studies has its beginnings as an offshoot of Semitic philology, a branch of Orientalism.<sup>1</sup> In this discourse, Ethiopia is often described as being *in* Africa but not being *of* Africa,<sup>2</sup> as if the geographical space that is presently called Africa can predetermine the quality of nations and their languages. Thus, Ethiopia is described as an island of early Christians surrounded by Muslims; the home of the Abbyssinians;<sup>3</sup> noble people that live in temperate highlands; “the dim lamp on the mountain top that lighted on the ever-dark night that was Africa”.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, in the Orientalist-Semiticist paradigm all that is good in Ethiopia is not indigenously Ethiopian but was brought to the Western side of the Red Sea by the Sabeen civilization on the Asian side of the Red Sea. Three thousand years ago these Asians brought with them their Semitic language. Today, the Abbyssinians, particularly those of Amhara and Tigrean ethnicity are said to be the true carriers of this Semitic culture. Thus, according to Ethiopianist discourse, the lower in altitude and the farther south one goes in Ethiopia the less civilized and the less authentically Semitic the people become.<sup>5</sup> Ethiopians, then, figure in the broader

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<sup>1</sup> Teshale Tibebu, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896-1974* (New Jersey and Asmara: Red Sea Press, 1995) xiii. For a clearer definition of Orientalism and the history of Semitic philology see, the now classic text: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> The phrase “being *in* Africa but not *of* Africa” is so ubiquitous to Ethiopianist discourse that I have actually forgotten who originally uttered this sentence. However, the idea behind this phrase rears its head in the works of prominent Ethiopianists such as: Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Edward Ullendorf, *The Ethiopians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960). As well as Adhane Haile Adhane’s discussion of nation building in his essay, “Mutation of Statehood and Contemporary Politics”, in *Ethiopia in Change*, eds. Siegfried Pausewang and Abebe Zegeye (London: British Academic Press, 1994) 12-29. Even the post-modern influenced work of Donald Donham shows traces of this thinking if only in his counter attempt to re-situate Ethiopian society as being African, (whatever that can mean) and not feudal in the essay; “Old Abbyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History”, *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, eds. Donald Donham and Wendy James (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 3-47.

<sup>3</sup> For Amharic and Arabic speakers it should be noted that Abbyssinia is the English rendering of the Amharic word *Habesha*, and the Arabic *Habesh*.

<sup>4</sup> Teshale Tibebu xvi.

<sup>5</sup> The work of Edward Ullendorf is notorious for its efforts to distinguish between the Abbyssinians proper and what he calls the negroid populations that inhabit Ethiopia. See Edward Ullendorf, *The Ethiopians*

literature on Africa as the continents noble savages: “the living land of the bible, of majestic ruin and barbarous splendour, lost in mountain fastness, lost in the recurrence of the same”.<sup>6</sup>

The Orientalist-Semiticist paradigm for doing Ethiopian Studies is closely tied to the process of nation building in Ethiopia. The ruling classes of Ethiopia, at least since the 14<sup>th</sup> century have articulated the founding of the nation as linked to the arrival of the Sabaeans. Indeed since the time of the *Kebre Negast*<sup>7</sup> until 1974, all Ethiopian emperors have traced their descendency to King Solomon of Jerusalem. Ethiopian history has therefore been written as the story of royal succession, leaving out of the picture those who live in Ethiopia but are not the Abbyssinians proper. I have therefore found that, although Ethiopian Studies claims to be secular and scientific it often reads like the court chronicles of Haile-Selassie and his predecessors.

Recent scholarship on Ethiopia has attempted to question the dominance of the Orientalist-Semiticist paradigm. Most of this work has come from Western trained Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians who would identify themselves rather loosely with a Marxist or neo-Marxist approach to doing social-science. However, if the Orientalist-Semiticist paradigm can be faulted for taking as “Abbyssinian everything the

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<sup>6</sup> Teshale xxi.

<sup>7</sup> *The Kebre Negast* or Glory of the Kings has been called the founding book of the Ethiopian nation. It is dated as having been written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century but is supposedly based on oral records that had been passed down through the generations. The *Kebre Negast* tells the story of the meeting of Saba (Queen of Sheba) with Solomon, the fact that they bore a child named Minilik and the arrival of Minilik and his court in Ethiopia. Based on this story, Ethiopian emperors claim to be descendents of Solomon. Thus in the rhetoric on nation building, the survival of Ethiopia has often been linked to the survival of the Solomonic line. Further, Ethiopia is often said to be the new Jerusalem. Unaware of the complexity of Middle-East crises, even today, many a school child in Ethiopia understands that they are Israeli. For a good discussion on the idea of election and the *Kebre Negast* in Ethiopia see, the chapter “Soldiers of Fortune” in the otherwise extremely troubling book by Messay Kebede, *Survival and Modernization: Ethiopia's Enigmatic Present* (Asmara and New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1999).

Abbyssinians say and do”,<sup>8</sup> the leftists can be faulted for attempting to examine Ethiopia through concepts that have little ability to pay attention to the nuances of the country’s history. For instance, during the 1960’s and 70’s it was common for the leftists to describe Ethiopia as a feudal society.<sup>9</sup> These days, it is common for the literature to decry the term feudal and to describe Ethiopian society as organized around ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> But, given that in the 1970’s the Ethiopian government shaped its policies around the category of class and given that the present regime organizes its policies by focusing on recognizing ethnic regions and ethnic groups, the left scholarship that criticizes the Orientalist paradigm often sounds like the court chroniclers that preceded them, but this time for States that claim to be modern and secular.

As time went on it therefore became clear to me that there was a need to rethink the terms in which Ethiopia’s hardships were discussed — a rethinking that did not leave the Ethiopians with the burden of carrying their hardships all alone, but at the same time did not become another colonial project. In many ways, then, working on this thesis has felt like a kind of wading in new territory. In the end, much to my own surprise, my only way out was to follow Walter Benjamin’s cue, who in his own efforts to critique the notion of modernity and its equation with progress turned to the construction of dialectical images.

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<sup>8</sup> Adhane 14.

<sup>9</sup> See the proceedings of a conference on feudalism convened in the early stages of the Ethiopian Revolution and attended by many, who today are still considered prominent Ethiopianists; *Conference on Ethiopian Feudalism* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 1976). Also see, what was considered ground breaking work at the time, the work of Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia: from Autocracy to Revolution* (London: Review of African Political Economy, Occasional Publications, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> In this regard the scholarship collected and associated with both Pausewang and Donham is particularly interesting, if not somewhat disturbing. See, Siegfried Pausewang and Abebe Zegeye, eds. *Ethiopia in Change* (London: British Academic Press, 1994). For Donald Donham’s take on things see, *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, eds. Donald Donham and Wendy James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

## Begging to Differ

Methodologically, then, this thesis has been inspired by Walter Benjamin's unfinished study of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris in the *Arcades Project*, and particularly the manner in which Susan Buck-Morss has taken up this project in her book, *The Dialectics of Seeing*. What is important for both of these authors is not the understanding of history as a continuum whose meaning is waiting to be revealed by the keen archivist, nor to develop a relativist philosophy of history. Rather, they attempt to "reconstruct historical material as philosophy"<sup>11</sup> in order to achieve "a phenomenological hermeneutics of the profane [...]".<sup>12</sup> The objective here is to strip history of its legitimating function so as to understand the conditions of possibility of the present. Rather than being involved in an endless search for origins, "historical objects are ripped out of developmental histories and understood allegorically, whereby the general is revealed in the particular".<sup>13</sup>

The dialectical image, Walter Benjamin tells us is "identical to the historical object; it justifies blasting the latter out of the continuum of history's course."<sup>14</sup> Yet, dialectical images are not empirically given, (that would be naturalism), nor are they in any way arbitrary (that would be positivism). Rather, the present mode of an object is a force-field where by its fore-history and after-history play themselves out. The fore-history of an object is its possibility, the after-history are the conditions of its cultural transmission. If we read the two together, we get the object in its present mode. Reading the two together also means that the after-history and the fore-history confront each other so that the object's present mode is no longer part of natural history but is an object with

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<sup>11</sup> Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1991) 55.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* 3.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* 218.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* 219.

political prescience. When fore-history and after-history confront each other, what we get is not “progress but actualization”.<sup>15</sup> Dialectical images, are “dialectics at a standstill”<sup>16</sup> and yet, just as any present moment is fleeting, so too is the dialectical image.

Dialectical images, then, have allowed me to move out from under the shadow of the Orientalist-Semiticist paradigm that dominates Ethiopian Studies. Following Benjamin’s lead when he undertakes to create dialectical images of Paris, this thesis, is an attempt to construct dialectical images of Addis Ababa and so offer a way to begin to critically think about the continued hardships of Ethiopia. As I mentioned earlier, I have not always known how to proceed. I did not have an argument and a conclusion set out long before I started writing this thesis. Rather, like the reader of this present work I have been involved in a process of discovery, learning and journeying. The only question at hand has been how to proceed. As a result, I have attempted to maintain a feeling of journeying throughout the body of this thesis.

Keeping Benjamin in mind then, Chapter One entitled, “Confronting Modernity”, mobilizes a number of contemporary theorists to flesh out a more nuanced manner through which to construct dialectical images. Chapter Two takes up these theorists, breaking up Addis Ababa into its performative parts and so begins the construction of dialectical images of the city.

Chapter Three carries on the work already begun in Chapter Two but is much more descriptive in nature. In this chapter I attempt to take the reader on a tour of Addis Ababa. Following a route that will lead the reader through central Addis Ababa, I walk the reader through a series of dialectical images of the city. Under each sub-heading in

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid* 219.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid* 219.

this chapter (except the last one) is a mini-dialectical image that can more or less be read on its own. Read together the mini-dialectical images work in conjunction with Chapter Two to create a more encompassing dialectical image of Addis Ababa.

In Chapter Four, I again take up Susan Buck-Morss' description of the dialectical image. Here, with the help of the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, I attempt to move away from (what appears to me to be) Buck-Morss' simplistic rendering of the political prescience of the dialectical image towards a more complex definition. From there I proceed to ask what can be learnt from our dialectical images of Addis Ababa and I attempt to draw some tentative conclusions about the hardships of Addis Ababa, and by extension that facing Ethiopia.

## **Writing**

Dialectical images are fleeting, they move; they are not graven images. In the essay, "The Idolatry of Rules: Writing Laws According to Moses", Arthur Jacobson points out that both naturalism and positivism depend on graven images; Naturalism in claiming that everything is already given is static. Positivism, on the other hand establishes a right procedure for doing things and then describes the world through those procedures.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Naturalism, Positivist images require two writings, however in the end its images are as static as Naturalist images. In this thesis I have attempted to be explicitly vigilant against falling into a mode of writing where I would be creating graven images. This thesis is therefore not only an experiment in finding new concepts through which to think about contemporary Ethiopia, it is also an experiment in writing.

In the afore-mentioned essay by Arthur Jacobson, we are also told that the modern author usually adopts one of two voices. The first voice is the all-knowing God, who rules over the world that they create through narration. The second voice is that of the hidden God, who rules through a character that judges for us the world that is narrated. In creating dialectical images of Addis Ababa, it seemed to me that it would be best to adopt a lesser role for myself than God, than the modern, and so avoid graven images. At various points in this thesis, I therefore, often speak in the third person plural. I also make myself a character in my own text. As well I refer to a “you” whom I never name. This is not an effort to aestheticize critical thinking, nor is it an attempt to confuse the reader. It is rather an effort to propose, on the one hand that I, you, we, them are inextricably tied together and at the same time it is to understand that I, you, we, them are in constant struggle with each other, over riding each other, doing different things at different times. The multiple voices adopted in this thesis is therefore an effort to narrate, while at the same time insisting that narration is perspective; it is to put into play multiple perspectives and so avoid becoming either a naturalist or a positivist.

Lastly, it should be said that this thesis is a tentative answer to a call put forward by Edward Said in the last chapter of his book *Orientalism*, whereby he asks; “How does one represent other cultures? What is *another* culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one’s own) or hostility and aggression (when one

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<sup>17</sup> Arthur Jakobson, “The Idolatry of Rules: Writing Laws According to Moses, With Reference to Other Jurisprudence” in *Deconstruction and The Possibility of Justice*, eds. Durrilla Cornell, et al (New York: Routledge, 1992) 111.

discusses the “other”)? Do cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politicohistorical ones?”<sup>18</sup>

Said himself begins to answer these questions when he claims that the notion of a culture as “radically different” from another gets us nowhere. At the same time, to pretend that conditions be they social, political, economic, historical or what have you, have not produced difference is to be apolitical and disingenuous. More importantly, it is to ignore human experience. This thesis, therefore, starts off by privileging experience, echoing Said, I have found it necessary to reject the notion of radical difference, and yet I have attempted to steer clear of a false universalism. But the reader should remember this is a tentative effort: a journey. Its success lies in what it opens up, not in what it proves or disproves.

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* 325.



**Fig. 2 The edge of Revolutionary Square, 2001. Photo, Elleni Zeleke.**

## Chapter One

### Confronting Modernity

Keeping in mind that Addis Ababa translates to mean new flower, we will be appropriating the memories its residents have of this relatively new city<sup>1</sup> in order to rub it against the landscape of transformation, “erasure and reinscription”<sup>2</sup> (modernism) that has characterized Addis Ababa since its founding in the late 1800’s. We are interested in this rubbing in order to create a counter-discourse to the developmentalism that is the first reading the passerby is confronted with when passing through the city. We understand developmentalism to be a latent discourse of modernism and we take the memories as “tactics” employed by the passer-by when waking though “espace propre”.<sup>3</sup> Gathered together, the memories will give us a notion of the practiced spaces, or the rhetorical stylings of the Addis Ababa resident. The tension between the rhetorical style of the Addis Ababa resident and the landscape’s obvious modernism will force the play of an analysis that can account for the city’s constant renewal and transformation along with its continued smelly, slum-like nature. Out of all of this we hope that a counter-discourse to developmentalism/modernism will seep out.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although the exact date of the founding of Addis Ababa is disputable, all agree that it is no earlier than 1886. Thus when we call Addis-Ababa a relatively new city, we do this understanding that the next newest city in Ethiopia, Gondar, dates its founding to the early 1600’s.

It is important to note that if we use 1886 as the date to mark the founding of Addis Ababa what we are in fact referring to is the establishing of a temporary settlement near the site of a hot-spring by Emperor Minilik’s wife, Queen Tayitu. In fact it was not until after the Ethiopian victory over the invading Italian army in 1896 that Addis Ababa was chosen as the permanent site of the capital of the new consolidated (some may say united) Ethiopia. It was also at this point that it became clear that Addis Ababa would become a sort of modernist monument for the rest of Ethiopia and the world in general- proving that this “backward empire” had at last entered the world stage. Highways were quickly built, as was the first grand hotel (Tayitu Hotel). See, Pankhurst, Richard. *The History of Ethiopian Towns From the Mid Nineteenth Century to 1935*. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> James Holston, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 5.

<sup>3</sup> Michele De Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life*. (Berkley: University of California Press, 1989) xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Here I do not want to suggest that the counter-discourse to developmentalism will simply seep out on its own accord nor do I want to suggest that it is merely invented by us, the thinkers and writers of this thesis.

We are particularly interested in Addis Ababa's transformation from the Marxist military junta (the Derg) to a new, more democratic and free market regime. Under the Derg, Scientific Socialism was adopted as the country's method of governance. On the basis of this new method, the military junta introduced across the country — but particularly in Addis Ababa — a public culture of signs and symbols that represented various aspects of the new regime. Lenin monuments were erected, as were numerous billboards of Marx, Lenin and Engels. In 1991, along with all the other iron curtain countries around the world, the Marxist military junta fell. The public billboard culture, however did not disappear; rather the billboards were replaced by ones produced by private companies.

We understand Addis Ababa's latest transformation as being more of the same, whereby the city's public space is organized under both regimes with the same aesthetic-politico sensibility. A sensibility, that is, grounded in modernism. We also view these billboards, their very public nature and the way they have come to dominate the Addis Ababa landscape, as serving as a useful heuristic device to get at the tactics employed by

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Rather, what I want to suggest is that we are involved in is a kind of movement, one which rubs the rhetorical stylings of the Addis Ababa resident against a landscape of transformation. We are aware that everyday, in the real world the shoe of the resident marks a groove on the asphalt road. Walking in the city produces consequences. Perhaps, then when we talk of rubbing, what we are doing is allowing ourselves a kind of reading of something that in many ways is already there; if we know how to read, that is. Here it is best to think of reading as an active, productive action rather than a passive one.

The approach I am adopting here has been influenced by three thinkers; Walter Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss, particularly her explication of Benjamin's philosophy of history in the book *Dialectics of Seeing* and James Holston in his book *The Modernist City*. Holston in talking of his method also claims to be following the Frankfurt school theorists. Thus he writes, "[my...] procedure begins with the substance of what is to be criticized and establishes its [the substance's] self understanding (its premises, intentions, categories, instruments and the like). It then unfolds their entailments, implications, and consequences which it uses to reexamine the object of investigation. [...By focusing] my analysis of Brasilia's development on its structure of premise and paradox...my interest...is to show how its unsolved problems, gaps and contradictions trip up the master plans, creating the conditions for their own transformation", (James Holston 13).

Addis Ababa's residents. This thesis will therefore focus its discussion around the experience and memories people have of Addis Ababa's billboards.

### **Walking and Telling**

We are attempting to tell a story, or a counter-story if you like, yet we cannot know the outcome of the story until it has been told. However, we have a narrative strategy so as to go somewhere; it is two fold.

We are not interested in the individual as the locus of analysis nor are we gathering memories that would provide us with an accurate image of what life was like in Addis Ababa under its various regimes. Rather our story starts by pushing together Raymond William's notion of *Structure of Feeling* with that of De Certeau's notion of *Practiced Place*.

"Structure of Feeling" is a term developed by Raymond Williams in his book *Marxism and Literature*. It is a term that allows one to "acknowledge the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which [...] we discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions but not always as fixed products, determined products"<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, in *Marxism and Literature*, William's argues that practical consciousness (that which is lived) is always different from official consciousness (that which can be described through already established fixed forms).<sup>6</sup> The difference between the two forms of consciousness is "not only a matter of relative freedom and control".<sup>7</sup> Rather, both practical and official consciousness, are "social and material".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*. (Oxford:Heinemann, 1993) 130.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* 130.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid* 131.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* 132.

Thus, for Williams, social analyses has often failed to acknowledge that which is moving and living as social because it converts relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still involved into fixed social forms.<sup>9</sup> Further, Williams argues there is always a tension between fixed forms and practical experience, much in the same way as there is a tension between official language and spoken language. Social analyses unable to grasp this tension reduce all that it cannot describe or articulate as fixed form into the personal or the subjective.<sup>10</sup> But it is clear: that which is everyday, although in tension with fixed forms, is still formed through social relations.

Williams suggests thinking about practical consciousness as the equivalent of the linguistic notion of style.<sup>11</sup> In *The Practices of Everyday Life*, Michele de Certeau describes, in a similar fashion, practiced place (walking in the city) as the equivalent of the rhetorical device of style. In this thesis, we want to push Williams and De Certeau together. We believe that De Certeau's notion of "espace propre" is similar to what Williams is talking about when he speaks of official consciousness. Hence we suggest that it would be useful to consider the notion of "space" (practiced place) with the notion of "structure of feeling".

As a corollary to the notion of "espace propre", de Certeau develops the notion of "tactics" and "strategies".<sup>12</sup> "Tactics", to our mind, resembles spoken language while "strategy" resembles official language. "Tactics" cannot depend on "espace propre" but are the paths city dwellers make out as they walk through the city. It is their style of speaking.

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid* 129.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* 130.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* 131.

<sup>12</sup> De Certeau xviii.

The methodological implications of pushing de Certeau and Williams together are that the critical thinker is able to acknowledge that everyday life does not resemble official life without returning to the individual and the subjective as the locus of analyses. Moreover, by distinguishing between “tactics and strategy” we already begin to discern a certain rubbing against the grain, and particularly in our case a rubbing against the landscape of Addis Ababa.

One side of our two fold narrative strategy then is to lay out for our listeners (which includes the researchers) the official landscape of Addis Ababa from the time of its founding until the present with a particular focus on the transition from the Derg to the present. We will use archival photos, look at old maps, talk with former mayors, look at documents produced at the office of the Addis Ababa Master Plan, examine newspaper articles, etc. For the sake of getting the work done we will also concentrate on — but not limit our investigations to — key public spaces and billboards in central Addis Ababa such as Piazza, Bole Road, Arat Kilo, Sidist Kilo, Meskel Square (former Revolutionary Square), and the area in and around Africa Hall. As well we will examine the various entrances and exists to Addis Ababa. In understanding the history of these specific sites we will be able to patch together a sense of what has been driving the development of Addis Ababa.

In laying out the official landscape of Addis Ababa we will also take as a given that no city is more modern than Addis Ababa. In this regard will follow James Holston’s argument in his book, *The Modernist City* that claims that there is an affinity “between modernism as an aesthetic of erasure and reinscription and modernization as an ideology of development in which governments regardless of persuasion seek to rewrite national

histories”.<sup>13</sup> In examining the public billboard culture introduced under the Derg and continued by private companies under the present regime we will be led in our discussion by texts such as Boris Groys’ *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Susan Buck-Morss, *DreamWorld and Catastrophe*,<sup>14</sup> and Zhang Xudong, “The Power of Rewriting”. What is important for each of these writers is that we understand Socialism as “a historically rational project of modernity [...] with Socialist Realism being a radical formulation of the mainstream enlightenment idea of modernity”.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Buck-Morss has argued that what binds the East and the West, Socialism and Capitalism is the 20<sup>th</sup> century dream of mass utopia, or as Groys might have it, a dream of total transformation<sup>16</sup>.

We want to lay out the structure on which we will rub the tactics of its users. We are laying out the structure by describing the landscape of Addis Ababa as modernist and by describing its official history through a number of archival means. Here, we are taking a queue and perhaps a little inspiration from James Young’s effort to understand how Nathan Rapport’s *Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* monument organizes historical memory. Young does not ask whether the monument witnesses events, nor does he ask if the monument distorts history. Rather, he breaks the monument into its performative parts,

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<sup>13</sup> Holston 5.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Xudong Zhang, “The Power of Rewriting: Post Revolutionary Discourse on Chinese Socialism”, eds. Thomas Lahusen, and E. Dobrenko, *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) 282.

<sup>16</sup> Groys writes; “The turn towards Socialist Realism was moreover part of the over all evolution of the European avant-garde. It has parallels not only in the art of Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, but also in French neo-classicism, in the painting of American regionalism, in the traditional and politically committed English, American and French prose of the period [...]. Where Socialist Realism differs from these is above all in its radical methods and a monolithic style that nowhere (with the possible exception of Germany) was applied with such consistency across all areas in the life of society. Under Stalin the dream of the avant-garde was in fact fulfilled and the life of society was organized in monolithic artistic forms, though of course not those that the avant-garde itself favored”. See, especially Chapter One, “The Russian Avante-Garde”, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 9.

“reinvesting the memorial text with the memory of its own constructedness”.<sup>17</sup> Young then asks what is the social, political and aesthetic dimensions comprising the monument's public life and what is our role in it all.<sup>18</sup> Young's method is thus to write a biography of the monument, but it is a biography that is neither the official story of the monument nor simply the recording of visitor's experience to the monument. The biography lies somewhere in between, allowing to come forth, a discourse about the monument's meaning, which lies outside of the monument's official history. We hope that this thesis will achieve something of this sort with regards to Addis Ababa.

The second side of our narrative strategy therefore is to lay out some memories of the city's changing landscape. Here again we take a little inspiration from Young who collects anecdotes from a variety of sources in order to get a sense of how Rapport's monument organizes memory. Similarly we will gather memories from a variety of sources, wherever they lie for the taking. We will talk with people, our family, friends, friends of friends, the people we work with, the people who work for us, we will read newspapers old and new, we will look at personal documentaries be it film or radio. We will tell our friends and other people what we are interested in. We will have conversations. Some of the conversations may be more official than others, some may be over a drink. Always, however, we will tell those we talk with about what we intend to do with the memories we collect. In the end however we will appropriate the memories from their sources and in a tapestry of sorts we will rub them against the official landscape that generates the memories together with the rememberer.

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<sup>17</sup> James Young, “The Biography of a Memorial: Nathan Rapport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument”, *Representation* ns 26. 69-106 (Spring 1989) 101.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid* 101.

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**Fig. 3 The edge of Revolutionary Square, 1988.** Photo, courtesy Ethiopian Tourism Commission.

## Chapter Two

### Living Amongst the Billboards: Art is Terror

1974

In the Byzantine world of early Christianity, the Greek word *telesma* shifted in meaning. Where once it meant tribute or tax, as well as ritual, by the fourth century AD the word's sense came to be *effective object*.<sup>1</sup> The shift in meaning is said to have come about through the work of Appolonius of Tyan whom we are told erected polished stones of storks to drive away living storks, a bronze scorpion to keep away living scorpions and who also created a mirror that showed the invisible on which the Names of God were inscribed.

Thus, in the Arabic world, Appolonius is known as *sahib al-tilasm*: a man with the knowledge of the Names of Gods and so a man with the power to chase Gods away.<sup>2</sup> In English, Appolonius' work lives on through the use of the word talisman. Yet in English, when we speak of talismans, we tend to think of either magic amulets or decorative designs that adorn the covers of books, the margins of a page or textile, rather than *effective objects* or the *Names of God*. In Amharic, the dominant language of highland Ethiopia, the Greek word *telesma* survives as *telsam*. In its everyday usage it continues to carry connotations of both: *effective object*, *ritual* and the *Names of God*. However, its older meaning of *tax* or *tribute* has disappeared, or maybe not?

Talismanic art is a living tradition in Ethiopia. One becomes sick, is in pain, or maybe one is involved in a case of unrequited love. In such a situation one may visit a

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Mercier, *Art that Heals: The Image as Medicine in Ethiopia* (New York: Prestel and The Museum for African Art, 1997) 18.

Dabtara — a cleric who has received a traditional education through the many schools attached to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church<sup>3</sup> but who is not a priest, merely a sage. One tells the Dabtara one's problems, the Dabtara listens and prescribes a cure. The cure is prepared on a scroll, that is, a parchment made from the skin of a sheep or a goat and which measures the length of your body. On the scroll, the Dabtara will draw or write (one hesitates to know which verb to use) a talisman or *telsam* — the name of a member of the trinity, an angel or a spirit. The patient keeps the scroll by his side, most often having it encased in a leather pouch and wearing it around the neck. Then, in the manner that Appolonius worked his magic two thousand years ago, the spirit that is troubling you will be countered with an image of itself and thus forced to flee your presence.

In addition to the obvious talismanic drawings, a scroll that a patient collects from a Dabtara usually contains prayers as well as figurative drawings. However, the prayers and the drawings have little to do with a reality that meets the eye and one should refrain from seeing them in such a vein. Rather, the words and figurative drawings are like talismans; they contain multiple meanings and can only be read by those schooled in the tradition of *Tebab* (wisdom). What may appear to be a drawing that represents something out there in the world, is meant to be read in the way one must read words — for their depth and not for their surface meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> The idea that Appolonius was employing was that you could use the image of a thing to combat the thing itself.

<sup>3</sup> The Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church and its members, which number a large percentage of Ethiopian highlanders, maintain an ambivalent relationship to talismanic art and its practitioners. In Ethiopia, talismanic art is part of the ancient practice of *Tebab* or Wisdom and remains a popular practice, yet as one observer has remarked; "Wisdom is the nocturnal aspect of Ethiopian scholars, the church their daily aspect". This observation was found in a pamphlet distributed by the Italian Culture Institute in Addis Ababa on the occasion of a show they hosted on Ethiopian talismanic art. The author of the pamphlet is unknown to me, *Gera Gedewon and Mezgebu* (Addis Ababa: Italian Cultural Centre, April 2002) 1.

In 1974, all this mystery and multiple meaning, the world of the Dabtara, scholars and professors of *Qene* (rhetorical poetry) and *Tebab* came to an unfortunate fate.<sup>4</sup> Faced with the rhetoric of a Marxist revolution, *Tebab* was labeled reactionary. If Marxist historiography has it that throughout history there is always a progressive and reactionary side, *Tebab* was part of the reactionary, part of the “bad” and “backward” Ethiopian traditions, part of the opium of the masses. In its place Socialist Realism became the dominant form of drawing and painting: Socialist Realism was declared the method of the Ethiopian progressive artist, and it was adopted as the sole method to be taught by the nation’s one and only post-secondary fine arts school. Thus in 1982, The Department of Ideology of the Central Committee of COPWE<sup>5</sup> published an article entitled, “Art and Ideology in the Ethiopian Revolution”. This article made clear that Scientific Socialism was the country’s method of governing and that art had a profound role to play in spreading this method. The article thus declares:

“The radical nature of a social revolution is not measured merely by its abolition of the former production relation that was based on exploitation. It must also weaken and ultimately destroy the reactionary ideology (the subjective condition for the existence of the former production relation) along with the other forms of social consciousness related to it and develop a new ideology, i.e. political outlook, set of moral values, art, etc.

Since the Ethiopian revolution is a radical revolution, it may be said that it has liberated art, which in pre-revolution Ethiopia was mainly used to propagate and advance the interests of the feudo-bourgeois ruling class. Post-revolution Ethiopian

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<sup>4</sup> It would not be overstating the matter to say that *Tebab* came to an unfortunate fate only in 1974. The discourses of modernity have been slow to penetrate Ethiopia. This is probably due to the fact that Ethiopia was never colonized by a European power. In addition, although, it can be argued that Addis Ababa was founded as a modernist city and that its founding coincides with Ethiopia’s increasing incorporation into the global economy, we can still say that in 1974, Ethiopian society was organized through “traditional” institutions. As a result the 1974 revolution marks a most dramatic break in the history of Ethiopia. Similar conjectures are elaborated in Teshale Tibebu. *The Making of Modern Ethiopia: 1896-1974*. See especially his epilogue.

<sup>5</sup> COPWE is an abbreviation for The Commission for Organizing the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia. The Commission was disbanded in 1984, on the tenth anniversary of the revolution, whereupon the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) was established.

art in all its forms[...]reflects the victories the Ethiopian masses have registered in the political, military, economic and social spheres of the struggle and at the same time plays a highly significant role in spreading the Marxist-Leninist ideology among the masses.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly an article entitled “The Cultural Revolution in Ethiopia”, published in 1984, in one of two daily newspapers functioning at the time, emphasized the fact that artists of pre-revolution Ethiopia had little sense of responsibility to the public. Contrary to this position, the article claimed that the new art of the revolution was very public in nature. Hence, where once people kept their visual images hidden, bound up in a leather case, or where a person would be found in a church, praying in front of a painting that was in fact covered up, “since the outbreak of the revolution of February 1974,

drawings or paintings of huge size, in warm colours and carrying slogans were visible, hanging on big buildings or attached to wooden stands in busy centres of Addis Ababa. Photographs were also used extensively for the same purpose and photograph posters with slogans in different national and international languages are now commonly found in every office building, in schools, hospitals, etc.”<sup>7</sup>

The revolution of 1974, therefore introduced a culture of erasure and reinscription that played itself out in a variety of ways, sometimes violently, and sometimes less dramatically but no less significantly in the erection of billboard-like artistic productions throughout the streets of Addis Ababa. These billboard-like structures attempted to erase from the heart of the residents of Addis Ababa all that was ancient and alive in Ethiopia in favour of the visible, the new, the scientific, the artistic production. In a word: the modern.

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<sup>6</sup> “Art and Ideology in the Ethiopian Revolution”, *Meskerem: A Marxist-Leninist Theoretical Journal*, Volume III, nos 12, March 1983: 48.

<sup>7</sup> “The Cultural Revolution in Ethiopia”, *Ethiopian Herald*, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1984, vol 39, nos 539: 3. During the course of doing research for this paper, I had a number of conversations with the artists who produced the posters and paintings for the Derg regime. What is clear is that young artists were commissioned (often through the use of force and intimidation) to create these paintings. Many of the artists were recent graduates from Ethiopia’s fine arts school. According to former teachers and students,

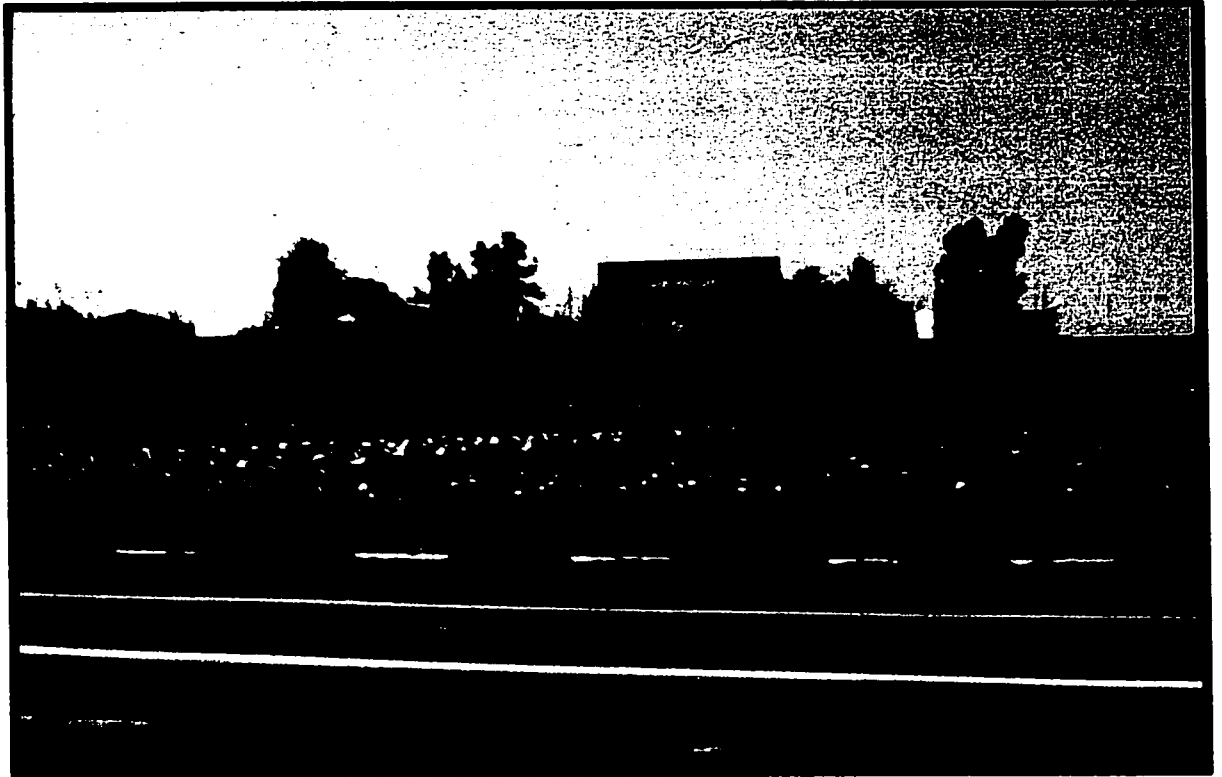
But cultural memory is harder to erase than people's lives and while the former Marxist regime in Ethiopia was good at the latter, it had a bit of a difficult time with the former. Indeed one of the funniest stories to circulate through the gossip channels during the reign of the Marxist regime, commonly known as the Derg (a Ge'ez word<sup>8</sup> that means committee), testifies to the survival of cultural memory and talismanic art.

The story goes something like this: A young man had very severe diarrhea and eventually showed up at one of the country's leading modern hospitals, *The Black Lion Hospital*. On seeing the patient, the doctor ordered him to undress and to don a hospital cloak. The patient did as instructed, except that around his neck something big and cumbersome remained. The doctor then asked the patient what the thing around his neck was. Where upon the patient became very defensive and instructed the doctor not to touch whatever it was that hung at his neck. An argument and struggle ensued but eventually the thing around the neck was revealed to be a talismanic scroll. Unravelling the scroll, the doctor was surprised to find the image of Marx, Lenin and Engels painted exactly in the manner as they appeared on the hundreds of billboards posted around Addis Ababa. The doctor then asked the patient what was the intention of the scroll. The patient replied, doctor, since we have adopted these three guys as our trinity, the country has dried up. I thought if I adopted the three guys on my scroll, my diarrhea would also dry up.

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during the Derg, the school was a virtual factory for the State where by it became increasingly difficult to tell the difference between what was being produced for school and what, for the nation.

<sup>8</sup> Ge'ez is also known as classical Ethiopic. It's the ancient language of Ethiopia of which the vernacular languages of Amharic, Tigrinya and the other highland languages are derived. It continues to be the language of education for traditional schools but in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century modern schools have replaced Ge'ez with the vernacular languages. Ge'ez would still be the language taught to students of *Tebab*.



**Fig. 4 An example of the common billboard-portraits of Marx, Lenin and Engels to be found in Addis Ababa in the 1980's. Photo, courtesy Ethiopian Tourism Commission.**

What to make of the transformation of Marx, Lenin and Engels into talismanic forms — albeit not very complex ones? How to understand this confrontation of the ancient with modernity? If we understand the transformation of Marx, Lenin and Engels into talismanic forms as an example of the tactics of the passer-by, what we must also remember is that tactics always rub against something. As we have already discussed in Chapter One if we are to make sense of the tactics, we must make sense of the something the tactics are rubbing against. In Chapter One we also showed that the best way to go about doing this would be to follow James Young who in his own attempt to understand the life of a public monument starts by breaking it up into its performative parts and later through the use of anecdotes seeks to understand its cultural transmission. Following

Young then, the questions this chapter must now ask are: what is the aesthetic and the political in this context; where do the two meet, and when they meet what new meanings of themselves do they generate? Moreover, we must ask: how can we understand memory and history, place and space as being transformed but also mediating, meaning-making, even as erasure and reinscription march forward?

Let us clear the air by first turning to the theorists Charles Taylor and Dilip Gaonkar. In “Two Theories of Modernity” Taylor schematizes two possible models for theorizing about modernity: an acultural and a cultural model.<sup>9</sup> In the acultural model, modernity is seen as culturally neutral because it is simply a stage that all societies move towards. Although such a model acknowledges that modernity arrived in the West first, it does not see that the West in any way owns modernity. Nevertheless such a model homogenizes the history of all cultures and peoples as moving towards one goal. Moreover, it fails to take into account that modernity arose at a particular historical moment, in a specific place, producing in that moment and place a distinctive culture itself.

Although, the cultural modernity model understands that even in the West, modernity is by no means the same, it does propose that we think of modernity as offering a particular way to view nature, self, reason, goodness, etc. As such a cultural model of modernity undertakes to express the historical contingency of the views modernity offers up. However, it also understands that if modernity differs in texture wherever it has been exported, this is because modernity unfolds differently according to the specificity of the places from which it takes root.

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, “Two Theories of Modernity”, *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Gaonkar (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

Taking up Taylor's cultural model in the essay, "On Alternative Modernities", Dilip Gaonkar, suggests that to think in terms of the cultural modernity model, means that we must acknowledge that, "modernity is not one, but many".<sup>10</sup> Thus Gaonkar writes:

Born in and of the West some centuries ago under relatively specific sociohistorical conditions, modernity is now everywhere. It has arrived not suddenly but slowly, bit by bit, over the *longue duree*—awakened by contact; transported through commerce; administered by empires; bearing colonial inscriptions; propelled by nationalism [...] and it continues to 'arrive and emerge' [...] but no longer from the West alone[...].<sup>11</sup>

Gaonkar then goes on to tell us that modernity has often been described as having a good side and a bad side. The good side is described as societal modernity and the bad side as cultural modernity. Societal modernity encompasses transformations such as the development of a secular outlook, the growth of science, the primacy of reason, and the institutionalization of market driven economies, administered states and people's governments. Cultural modernity on the other hand tends to refer to the various aesthetic movements that arose in the West in opposition to "bourgeois order and orderliness".<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the stifling ethos of the middle-class, these movements celebrated imagination and the heroism of modern life in order to allow for more beauty, happiness and pleasure. At times their opposition to middle-class modernity was so extreme that they called for the smashing of all that we associate with societal modernity.

Gaonkar points out that Taylor's cultural model for theorizing modernity does away with such dichotomies. Rather, it compels us to start any analysis of modernity from a site-specific location. Such a reading of modernity understands that from the outset the institutionalization of a certain type of order can never be separated from the

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<sup>10</sup> Dilip Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities", *Alternative Modernities*, eds. Dilip Gaonkar (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001) 17.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* 1.

culture and politics of a place.<sup>13</sup> As such modernism — an aesthetic movement, cannot be read off as something separate from modernity — a phenomena that relates more to the institutional organization of a society. Indeed, if we are to understand how memory and history, place and space are born of the city that bears them, it is imperative that we read modernity and modernism together. After all, in a city like Addis Ababa squares were redesigned and streets redecorated under the tenets of Socialist Realism. As memory and history, place and space were transformed to bear the new meanings generated by the city; memory and history, place and space came to confront modernity in a form where politics was aestheticized in the very streets that bore them. To understand how memory and history, place and space come to constitute their new self-understanding, we must therefore read modernism and modernity in Addis Ababa, together.

Yet, if we know that memory survives attempts at erasure, giving rise to diverse forms of modernism, as well as new kinds of friction between place and space, what we also know is that in Addis Ababa in the period after 1974, memory became less and less sure of its own existence.

How do we know this? Because memory is one of us. Why are we concerned with it? Because it is the leader of our tour of Addis Ababa. How can it lead a tour if it does not know whether it exists? We must understand this as its particular talent. In any case this is how it experiences modernity. And what can its talents do for us? If we are patient and unravel its production we will see how modern it really is. As we unravel it, we will not look to explain how it has come to have this or that behavior. No. Instead, we will begin to understand how it has come to constitute its self-understanding (or lack thereof)

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid* 2.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* 16.

— an understanding born of the city it was raised. But if the city bore it, it also bears the city. Thus we can say its experience of modernity is a transversal process. In understanding its modernity we begin to recognize Addis Ababa's particular inflection of modernity and vice-versa. Why have we started with it and not the city (history, place and space)? The thing is, we needed a guide.

### **Living Amongst the Billboards**

Our guide<sup>14</sup> was “born in Addis at a time when modernization was not a process but a way of life...modern cars, telephones, high rises and mothers working outside the home. Her mother was a working woman who owned and drove her own car to and from the office everyday. They had a *serateNo* (worker) and a *mogzit* (nanny) even when they lived in this dilapidated rental in a less than reputable part of the city. Her mother built a home and moved them back to Bole [a more reputable part of town...]. That was a year into the revolution and they were becoming accustomed to and frightened of the news of *tokes* (shooting) and *gidiya* (killings or massacres).”

“She remembers her mother driving them back from school and urging them to hit the floor when shooting started. Memories of that are jumbled in with memories of the Italian man who was killed in his home after he had held off dozens of soldiers. He lived

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<sup>14</sup> Our guide is memory, but as we shall see, the argument of this chapter is that if, memory is to exist, it always needs a place (be it an object or a person) in which to lodge itself. The opposite statement: that people or an object need memory if they are to exist is also the argument of this chapter. As a result, our guide often takes on the quality of a person or persons. The biography of our guide is therefore a composite compiled from testimonials written for the website *Seleda.com: A Website for Young Ethiopian Professionals*. The testimonials were written over the years 1999-2002 by a variety of residents and former residents of Addis Ababa. In appropriating these testimonials for the purposes of writing our guide's biography I have attempted to quote them as they were originally written. However, as the testimonials were written in the first person, I have changed the pronouns used in the original to conform with the flow of the narrative of this paper.

within earshot of their new home in Bole so she was treated to the echoing sounds of his government-sanctioned termination".<sup>15</sup>

"His childhood was normal by Ethiopian standards, until he reached his teenage years, his parents refused to let him go outside of the house[...]. He never associated the lack of personal freedom with the daily *affeszas* (abduction for the purpose of recruiting soldiers) and the ever-encroaching war. He hated his parent's irrational rules, hence he was only to happy when they decided to send him into exile".<sup>16</sup>

"She was never angry at the circumstances. She never let her self stop to think why "it" happened in the first place. It was just...life... It was just life that she paid for the bullets that killed her sisters and brothers...and it was just life that she had to keep silent, bow in deference and hope the dead would help keep her alive one more hour. She pretends then, not to hear the gunshots that snuffed out a whole generation...".<sup>17</sup>

"And twenty-three years later his family is haunted by the same ghost as they hold each other at arms length [...] afraid of what might happen if they stood by each other too close. So they shake hands when they part and they shake hands and politely kiss each other when they meet and indirectly help each other survive the silence".<sup>18</sup>

A feeling that is common to our guide is shame. In fact it is the reoccurrence of this feeling, that assures our guide of its own existence. Psychologically speaking, someone once said of our guide that it had a super big, super-ego. Yet if this is so, we can

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<sup>15</sup> Anonymous testimonial, "The Age of Innocents," December 3 2002 <seleda.com/mar01/mystory.shtml>.

<sup>16</sup> Dawit B, "Addis Lullabies," December 3. 2001 <seleda.com/jul\_aug01/mystory.shtml>.

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous testimonial, "The Sweetest Sounds," December 3. 2001 <seleda.com/sept/sweetest\_s.shtml>.

<sup>18</sup> Yoseph M. Selassie, "Cleaning up My Brothers Wounds," Decemeber 3. 2001 <saleda.com/june/cleaning.shtml>.

also say that what this person did not know is that our guide has no ego. Speaking about our guide in psychological terms might thus be said to be wholly inappropriate.

Everything our guide does is for the Other. Is this a pathological denial of the self? Before we make this claim let us first understand our guide's operation. When our guide defines itself through the Other, it is not performing some kind of Kantian maneuver, where one needs a measure of objectivity only to confirm that one is a self capable of legislating for oneself to oneself. On the contrary our guide understands that the self is always a set of relations, not in the Marxist sense but as an expression of something else. If our guide doubts its existence now it is because somehow through revolution and development, "erasure and reinscription", our guide finds that memory and community have disappeared, survived only by the Kantian self.<sup>19</sup> Thus, our guide's only option now is to have an ego. But if the point of the ego is to have desires and not to be constantly caught up in moral quandaries (attempting to know how to behave in relation to the Other), it is also something that has been historically forged. Unable to pull an ego out of the sky, our guide finds instead that it must doubt its own existence.

*In Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Giorgio Agamben writes:

To be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed. But what cannot be assumed is not something external. Rather, it originates in our own intimacy; it is what is most intimate in us (for example, our own physiological life). Here the "I" is thus overcome by its own passivity, its

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<sup>19</sup> When I talk about the Kantian self, I am in no way attempting to claim that there is only one kind of self that can be read in the texts of Kant. However, as I attempt to show later in this paper, one can talk about a Kantian self as a cultural object: an object with certain dimensions and with a certain kind of impact in the world out there. This object has little to do with Kant himself but is merely one inheritance, albeit a dominant one that we have derived from the texts of Kant. If I do not refer to Kant's actual texts when discussing the Kantian self it is because I want to avoid an unnecessary argument with the classical Kantians, the neo-Kantians, etc. Rather, my interest is to talk about the Kantian self in the way one would talk about a T.V show or any other cultural object (at least if one is a student of Communications); not necessarily by plowing through the original text but by attempting to understand how the object's meaning has been produced by the vagaries of time and space.

ownmost sensibility: yet this expropriation and desubjectification is also an extreme and irreducible presence of the 'I' to itself. It is as if our consciousness collapsed and, seeking to flee in all directions, were simultaneously summoned by an irrefutable order to be present at its own defacement, at the expropriation of what is most its own. In shame, the subject thus has no content other than its own desubjectification, it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame.<sup>20</sup>

And what of our guide's shame? One thing for certain is that there are two contexts where we see our guide blush the most. The first place is at political rallies, where big men and sometimes big women, get up to make big speeches. Here, as the screaming crowds increase their pitch our guide's face glows even more. The May Day rallies, in particular, are the ones that as a child, really affected our guide. For days and days after, our guide would experience this need to run away from itself. However, continually confronted with a hot face, our guide was assured that it was still alive. Oddly enough, now, where our guide feels shame is at art galleries and poetry readings. The more the author is assured of their originality the redder our guide's face becomes.<sup>21</sup>

At this point then, it might do us well to remember what Michel Foucault, has said vis-a vis the existence of an author:

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<sup>20</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999) 105,106.

<sup>21</sup> The experience of shame that art shows induce in the Addis Ababa resident was brought home to me most vividly at a contemporary dance show I attended in Addis Ababa in April 2002. The dance was hosted by The Alliance Francaise— an organization dedicated to disseminating French culture to all the corners of the earth that have at one time or another been touched by the French language. The dance was by a group from the former French colony of Burkina Faso, and although flavoured with an African accent, the dance was very modern and included long moments of movement done in silence. While many of us who had been trained in how to view such work were intrigued by the hybrid nature of the dance, the local audience were more or less embarrassed by the whole thing. As a result, the audience clapped throughout the entire performance and at times, when, for instance the dancers were nearly naked, the audience let out squeals of giggles, groans and quiet shouts that asked, *mindinaw* (what?). As a result of the audience's reaction to the dance it was impossible to concentrate on the art (dance) on display. However, what was more interesting was how those of us who were more experienced in such matters read the audience reaction. In the post dance discussion, a common explanation for the audience behaviour was their immaturity as art lovers. It seems to me, however, that a more complex explanation is deserved.

“We can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author. Discourses, whatever their status, form or value, and regardless of our manner of handling them, would unfold in the anonymity of a murmur”.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to remember this hypothetical situation, because it was Foucault’s life work to show that even as we claim that the self is prior to social-relations, we are already showing that the autonomous self is a fiction. Thus Foucault says, the subject is,

a particular, vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals.... If a proposition, a sentence, a group of signs can be called “statement”, it is not therefore because, one day, someone happened to speak them or put them into some concrete form of writing; it is because the position of the subject can be assigned.<sup>23</sup>

Speaking, then, is always a murmur authored first and foremost by the world. Yet, what this also suggests is that every turn of a phrase marks a relation between an impossibility of speaking, a possibility of speaking, all that has been said before and all that can ever be said anew.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Giorgio Agamben says, following Foucault that in the very act of

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<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *Essential Works, Vol 2: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion (New York: The Free Press, 1998) 222.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault in Agamben 141.

<sup>24</sup> My ideas around the modalities in which speech gives itself have been developed through reading Giorgio Agamben. It is worth quoting Agamben at length in this regard as it is key to the work we shall be doing in the rest of this thesis. He writes: the modal categories — possibility, impossibility, contingency, necessity — are not innocuous logical or epistemological categories that concern the structure of propositions or the relation of something to our faculty of knowledge. They are ontological operators, that is the devastating weapons in the biopolitical struggle for Being, in which a decision is made each time on the human and the inhuman, on “making live” or “letting die”. The field of this battle is subjectivity [...]. The categories of modality are not founded on the subject, as Kant maintains, nor are they derived from it; rather the subject is what is at stake in the processes in which they interact [...].

Possibility (to be able to be) and contingency (to be able not to be) are the operators of subjectification, the point in which something possible passes into existence, giving itself through a relation to an impossibility. Impossibility, as a negation of possibility (not [to be able]), and necessity, as a negation of contingency (not [to be able not to be]) are the operators of desubjectification, of the destruction and destitution of the subject— that is, processes that, in subjectivity, divide potentiality and impotentiality, the possible and the impossible. The first two constitute Being in its subjectivity, that is in the final analysis as a world that is always my world, since it is in my world that impossibility exists and touches (*contingit*) the real. Necessity and possibility, instead define Being in its wholeness and solidity, pure substantiality without subject — that is, at the limit, a world that is never *my* world since possibility does not exist (Giorgio Agamben 147).

speaking lies an “ethics immanent”.<sup>25</sup> Or perhaps, if we were a practitioner of *Tebab*, we might say that in every speech act, lies an inheritance, a tax, a tribute, an obligation. Thus, if our guide feels shame, living amongst the billboards of Addis Ababa, what we want to suggest is that it is because the tax and the obligation inherit in speaking has been erased.

An ambition has been asked of our guide that it has little interest in. If, being modern implies that our guide must be artistic, autonomous and new, what we understand is that this autonomy is what leaves our guide vulnerable to canceling out its own existence. This is because we understand that in asserting the idea of an author as radical newness, the self as an expression of something else is always denied. As our guide walks among the billboards of Addis Ababa, modernity fails it.

### **Art is Terror.**

In the article we mentioned earlier with regard to art and ideology in Ethiopia, a claim is made that if we are to understand the role of art in the Ethiopian Revolution — a revolution that in 1982 was in a period of transition whereby the preconditions of Socialism were being prepared — we must look to “the experience of those countries which have accomplished the task of Socialist construction and [...] examine [...] the development of art in these countries during the period of transition”.<sup>26</sup> The article then describes the various stages of Realism, starting with Romantic Realism, then Critical Realism and ends with Socialist Realism and the great October Socialist Revolution. What, then, is articulated as the solution for art in Ethiopia are the tenets of Socialist

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<sup>25</sup> Agamben 143.

<sup>26</sup> Meskerem 51.

Realism as it existed in the 1930's in the Soviet Union. At this point in our elaboration of the playing out of memory and history, place and space and their relation to aesthetics and politics in Addis Ababa, it might do us well to turn to Boris Groys critical explication of Socialist Realism in his book *The Total Art of Stalinism*.<sup>27</sup>

However, before we take this turn it must be reiterated that prior to the revolution, Ethiopia had no substantial tradition of secular art. It was not until the post-Mussolini period that the State set up the country's first, post-secondary fine arts school and it was not until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that galleries became common to Addis Ababa, if not the rest of the country. Thus, if we are interested in a detailed examination of Socialist Realism, it is because we understand that the introduction of a public art practice into the streets of Addis Ababa marks a dramatic break in the history of the relationship between self, visibility and publicity in Ethiopia. Here, autonomous, publicly accessible art objects take precedence over *effective objects* that conjure up the *Names of God*. Moreover, as we have already begun to propose, this new relationship between self,

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<sup>27</sup> One of the artists that I had lengthy conversations with while conducting research for this paper was Eshetu Tirunch. A painter, Eshetu had in fact created a number of billboard-like paintings in the early years of the Derg regime. Later he received an MFA from a school in the former USSR. In our discussions Eshetu was keen to remind me that during the time of the Derg, what was implemented in the Ethiopian Fine Arts School and on the billboard-like structures around Addis Ababa while called Socialist Realism were not true to the tenets of the method. Eshetu clearly believed in the acultural model for theorizing modernity and wanted to make it clear that Ethiopia could never have had Socialist Realism since such a method develops out of romantic and then critical realism, traditions that had never taken place in Ethiopia.

To be clear, my concern when talking about Socialist Realism in Ethiopia is not to show that the Ethiopians were true to its method or not. Rather, I am keen to understand the ideology that was imported into Ethiopia when the state claimed that Socialist Realism should be the method taught at the art school and employed by artists in general. And to be sure, I am also aware that Groys' work is seen as controversial within the broader literature on Socialist Realism. However, it seems to me, that much of the criticism does not engage Groys where the strength of his argument lies; that is, in his concern to use the lens of Socialist Realism to historicize and question the category "art" and "the autonomous individual". Indeed, it is precisely because of the focus of his argument that he is useful in understanding the mechanism of Socialist Realism in its international inflections, if not its actual day to day development. See, Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*. For a more detailed framing of Groys within the literature see, Ella Effimova, "To Touch on the Raw: the Aesthetic Affectations of Socialist Realism," *Art Journal* ns 56, 72-80 (Spring 1997).

visuality and publicity suggests to the residents of Addis Ababa a kind of experience of modernity that brings about feelings of shame and, we will argue is quite terroristic. A critical examination of Socialist Realism is therefore a critical examination into how our guide has come to be so shamed. Of course, more obviously an examination of Socialist Realism leads us back to one of the founding questions of this chapter, which is: what is aesthetics and politics in the context of the city that is our concern?

What is at stake in Boris Groys' reading of Socialist Realism is a whole approach to history and historiographical problems raised by the way in which the discipline of art history in the West has taken up Russian twentieth century art. Groys' book is a revisionist attempt to address a methodology that for the most part views Socialist Realism as a kitschy return to the classics — bad art substituting for State propaganda — while at the same time valorizing the avant-garde as genuine art. Such an approach takes the history of persecution that characterized art under Socialist Realism as its point of departure and assumes that because Socialist Realism was an arm of the State it is morally indefensible. For Groys, such a view has at its base a rather rosy view of what art is, assuming that art should never be attached to power, when, in fact, it always is. What becomes more interesting, if one wants to get at the persecution that characterized life under Socialist Realism, is to ask: under what name was all of the persecution taking place? As well, one must inquire into the mechanism of that name so as to understand why certain art was canonized and others not. Further, what must be shown is that just because the avant-garde was locked out of power, does not mean it did not have a *will to power*. Indeed, if the avant-garde had been successful at its own project it would not be seen in art galleries and museums. It is the failure of the avant-garde's bid for power that

makes it available as art. Indeed, it is Groys' argument that well-educated elite's formulated Socialist Realism. If they were successful in their bid for power, it is because they had assimilated the arguments of the avant-garde all too well.<sup>28</sup> The similarity of the arguments by the victors and victims, thus obliges Groys to put all of their approaches in historical perspective whereby he can question the innocence of that which preceded Socialist Realism and "the modernist aesthetic intention as such".<sup>29</sup>

Modernism for Groys, while undoubtedly something new, is on the other hand part of an age-old story about bidding for power. Groys' approach is genealogical — he is interested in asking after the conditions of possibility of the object under examination; he does not want to simply assert that the present is simply yesterday in a different guise, and yet Groys is not surprised by any of the terror that he describes. If he has any political interest in his approach, it is merely to show that in modernism the perspective of power and the perspective of art amount to the same thing. Groys thus defines modernism as an artistic impulse that moves away from representing reality to transforming the world. This impulse finds its apotheosis in the Soviet block in Socialist Realism. He also claims that while there are formal differences between the avant-garde and Socialist Realism, these differences can be explained through the logic of the avant-garde. Socialist Realism, for Groys, must therefore always be read within the larger framework of modernism. Indeed, in the first two chapters of *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Groys spends a considerable amount of time describing historical events that concretely illustrate the logic of the avant-garde. In this way, he makes a strong case for understanding Socialist Realism as an extreme manifestation of the avant-garde's project

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid* 9.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid* 8.

and modernism in general. In what follows, we will undertake a brief explanation of how Groys comes to this startling conclusion.

The historical avant-garde of Russia was dissolved by party decree in 1932. The intention was to put an end to the extreme factional fighting between the numerous artistic groups such as the fellow travelers, AkhRR, RAPP and Novy Lef. Stalin's aesthetic-political coup was preceded by a series of meetings attended by government officials who once were active in the avant-garde circles, as well as artists and writers from the afore-mentioned groups. Groys argues that what is clear from these conferences is that the entire world was viewed as material to be mastered. As such, the main artistic project was to become the building of Socialism. The master of the project would be Stalin, not the avant-garde. Hence, if the triumph of the avant-garde project coincided with the defeat of the avant-garde, it is because Stalin was their best student, aestheticizing politics, where the avant-garde could only politicize aesthetics. Thus, Groys argues that the avant-garde artist always saw their art as the telos of a long history of inferior art, and therefore remained a servant to history. In its attempt to transform the Russian peasant into the Soviet new man, the avant-garde was never able to tap into the legacy left behind by traditional art. Socialist Realism on the other hand, was truly post-historical. The present being point-zero, the past simply became a pre-history that had two sides, the progressive and the reactionary. The Socialist Realist artist in creating his work was not involved in an eclectic and kitschy project but was borrowing from its pre-history so as to move people in the present.

The rationalism of Stalinism is most apparent in the fact that it was prepared to exploit the previous forms of life and culture, whereas even the avant-garde detractors of

the past knew and respected the heritage to such a degree that they would rather destroy than utilize or profane it.<sup>30</sup> For Groys what permitted Stalin's radicalism of the avant-garde project lies in the formulation of the idea of the typical within Socialist Realism. The aesthetic logic of Socialist Realism rejects Realism and Naturalism as bad bourgeois habit. Rather, if an artist is to reflect reality one "must persuasively express the essence of a given social force"<sup>31</sup>. Socialist Realism, then, adapts what is essentially a formalist move and renames it Realism. For both the avant-garde and Socialist Realism, what is important is to focus on the hidden essence of this or that phenomena, always orienting itself to that which is about to emerge but has not yet quite come into being. The role of the individual artist, then, is one wherein understanding that the space of art is now society, he taps into the inner dreams of society, mimetically offering it up to the masses. What also becomes clear is why it is important to eliminate artistic visions that differ from Stalin's vision: for to dream differently is to be in direct competition with the State.

The avant-garde contained within it a demand for the artist to act like an engineer, maneuvering the human sub-conscious so as to effect change. If the avant-garde limited its manipulations to shock, Stalin better understood that to automatize consciousness one must not simply bare devices, but study and purposefully apply devices:

In the Soviet period, [...] language, acquired a new unity, a new linguistic subconscious that had been artificially 'drummed in' by the party [...] The slogans thus became transrational and ceased to bear any definite content, that is, in the terms of formalist aesthetics they were 'formalized' and 'aestheticized'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid* 42.

<sup>31</sup> Malenkov in Groys 50.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* 45.

The central point, here, is to remember that for the avant-garde as for Socialist Realism the sub-conscious is what dominates human consciousness. This sub-conscious can be technically manipulated to create a new individual.

If the attempt to redesign the subconscious is a thoroughly rationalistic, enlightenist and pragmatic project, for Groys, the energy for this project is derived from the event which marks all of modernity, that is the death of God. Avant-garde aesthetics in its knowledge and participation in the murder of God is an attempt, according to Groys to usurp the position of God. As well, it is an attempt to outstrip God's time by "finding ahead of it something irreducible, extra-spatial, extra-temporal and extra-historical".<sup>33</sup> In the end, avant-garde aesthetics proves to be a thoroughly mystical project whereas Socialist Realism preserves this project by assimilating what Groys calls the demiurgic impulse of the avant-garde into a project of the State.

Throughout his book, Groys calls the avant-garde artist a demiurge. Literally the word means a public worker. However, the word also means the maker or fabricator of the universe. In contrast to the supreme God, this fabricator has a devilish quality, fashioning from chaos, laws of evil. Modernist folly for Groys involves the belief that humans can become God to themselves. Here, Groys is not necessarily reverting to a religious definition of God. Rather, Groys accepts God as a human creation. Yet, if this is so, he further understands modernist folly as a belief that humans can fully represent themselves to themselves.

Indeed for Groys, implicit in the very nature of the artistic project is a *will to power*. Groys deliberately uses the phrase *will to power* in order to link art with Nietzsche, the death of God and thus to modernization. In order to get at the mechanism of the *will*

to power Groys spends a considerable amount of time describing the genre of art known in the former Soviet Union as “Sots Art”. This genre which crosses all mediums is not a stylistic movement but a theoretical one that arose in the former Soviet Union in the mid 1970’s and which takes as its base the gesture that all art must reflect within it arts complicity with “the strategy of political coercion”.<sup>34</sup> Such a maneuver on the part of the artist has the purpose of revealing the internal structure of Stalinist art and as such is able to make an incredible historiographical impact on our understanding of Socialist Realism.

In the beginning of the chapter that looks at Sots Art, Groys quotes at length a passage from both Nietzsche and one from Malevich.<sup>35</sup> In the Nietzsche passage, what is described is the death of God and the attendant disappearance of the horizon line. This moment is what constitutes us as liberated, modern human beings. Yet, Nietzsche’s passage contains an ambivalent tone because for Nietzsche the event has not quite come off. However, in the passage quoted by Malevich, the death of God is taken as a fact: “I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and got out of the circle of objects, the horizon ring that has imprisoned the artist and the forms of nature”.<sup>36</sup>

As Sots artists attempt to engage with the history of art in the Soviet Union, the theme of the lost horizon constantly recurs. However, if the lost horizon leads the avant-garde artist to supermatist nothingness, for the Sots artists, that nothingness is revived as an ideological sign par excellence. So, if we can say that with the avant-garde as with Nietzsche, the horizon represents a limit on human possibility: “a feeling of progress in

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid* 18.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* 81.

<sup>35</sup> Kazimir Malevich is considered by many art historians to be the leading artist of the Russian avant-garde. He is the founder of the supermatist style in visual art: a style that rejects the gesture towards realism and three dimensional drawing in favour of exploring the possibilities of two dimensional, geometric space. See, Yevgeny Kovtun, *The Russian Avante-garde in the 1920’s and 1930’s* (St Petersburg: Parkstone Publishers with Aurora Art Publishers, 1996).

what remains a senseless treading in place”,<sup>37</sup> for the Sots artist, supermatist nothingness is the rendering of human space into two-dimensional nothingness. Indeed, for the Sots artist the forbidding of space by the Russian avant-garde amounts to a ban on human movement in human space.

The consequence of the loss of the horizon therefore raises the question of the demiurgic impulse of the avant-garde and its demand to make the space of art, the space of society — a demand that also lies at the basis of Socialist Realism. For the Sots artist, taken to their ultimate conclusion, abstract geometric space and Socialist Realism are no longer opposed but epistemologically belong together: both reduce living space to a plane.

Contrary to this plane, the work of the Sots artists, Komar and Malemid show that what unites Sots artists with each of us is an amalgam of world histories contained in each of us. In the work entitled *The Yalta Conference*, Komar and Malemid take E.T and Stalin as the icons that govern the modern sub-conscious. While, one may argue that what these two figures represent are the differences of two empires, for these artists the icons are figures of the other’s dark side. What may appear to be different is in fact the Janus face of a family closely related. More importantly for Groys, however, is that both icons symbolize the utopian spirit that dominated each empire. Epistemologically speaking, what Komar and Malemid show us is that what ties all revolutions and utopias together is an attempt to stop time, “generating a notion of individuality beyond history and time; powerful as a tiger it will destroy everything just to be left alone”.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Malevich in Groys 83.

<sup>37</sup> Groys 82.

<sup>38</sup> Melamid in Groys 93.

What is at stake for the Sots artist then is not an Other (or individual particular) who seems forever out of reach (extra-temporal and extra-spatial) but an individual who from the outset is formed through social relations and is always an expression of something else (human movement in human space). What Sots art is describing, according to Groys, is that without carnivalesque,<sup>39</sup> the Kantian Subject is always, already a fiction. If modernism (whether it is avant-garde aesthetics or Socialist Realism), understands that there is something extra-temporal and extra-spatial that lies prior to social relations (individuality) and that mastering the materials of the world is a question of actualizing this individuality, the Sots artist, alternatively knows that this actualization is simply a *will to power* that is potentially terroristic. Terror lies with the one who thinks he is an individual (and therefore extra-temporal and extra-spatial) and in an effort to remake the world or simply assert his world causes harm to his relations (reduces living space to a plane).

The recently deceased artist Gedewon Mekonnen<sup>40</sup> of Gondar, Ethiopia is not a Sots artist. In fact, in all likelihood he has never heard of Sots Art, nor of the debates that

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<sup>39</sup> In referring to carnivalesque Groys is taking a side ways swipe at the numerous works generated in the West that have taken up the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his notion of carnivalesque. Most of these writings attempt to suggest a form of alternative subjectivity that moves away from the dominant model of the autonomous bourgeois subject. However, from Groys' point of view, as well as ours, these works are too concerned with recouping a lost Other. For us the Other was never lost and therefore, there is no need to recoup it, or him, or her. Indeed, from our point of view, what we would suggest is that by attempting to recoup the lost Other these thinkers remain locked in a logic that is the very one they are trying to escape. As a result, their theorizations seem all the more dangerous for doing so. I am thinking in particular of the celebration of carnivalesque by Stallybrass and White, as well as Mary Russo. See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Poiltics and Poetics of Social Transgression* (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1986), as well as Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> Most of what I know of Gedewon and the context in which he works has been learnt through a conversation with the French philosopher and art historian, Jacques Mercier; the Ethiopian Film-maker Maji Abdi and myself. The conversation came about when, through an accident I met Mercier at Maji's house in Addis Ababa. While talking with Mercier and Maji, I had no idea our conversing would inform this chapter to the degree that it has. In retrospect the conversation taught me more about Ethiopian art than many books have taught me. I remain grateful to both Maji and Mercier for the opportunity to discuss Gedewon and Ethiopian magic art in general. Mercier has also written about Gedewon in his book, *Art that Heals: The Image as Medicine in Ethiopia*. As well, I was able to view a number of Gedewon's works

rage about modernism, post-modernism, modernity and tradition. Yet, Gedewon's work demonstrate an uncanny adeptness to surviving modernity despite efforts to erase his practice and so redefines modernity itself. Gedewon was a practitioner of *Tebab*. As well he was a teacher of *Qene* (rhetoric and poetry) at one of the most famous schools at Washera. Starting in the 1960's Gedewon taught in Addis Ababa. Despite, not being fully aware of the debates that rage about modernism, Gedewon must have been dramatically effected by the discourses of modernity travelling to their peripheries. For instance, at the time Gedewon moved to Addis Ababa the city was going through a boom period with a number of buildings deliberately imitating modernist concepts.<sup>41</sup> As well, the former Derg Governor for the province that Gedewon is from is presently in prison on charges of genocide. Further, Gedewon must have witnessed the decline of respect and popularity for his school, his wisdom and his knowledge; eclipsed, of course, by the triumphant discourses of modernity. However, as a practitioner of *Tebab*, it would have been difficult for Gedewon to follow the ways of building styles in Addis Ababa and assert his individualism in a manner that was strictly his own. In this way we can see that the issues that Gedewon faced during his life bear an uncanny resemblance to the Sots artist.

In late life, Gedewon, no longer drew talismans for patients that came to see him but used paper and ink to draw the visions of his former patients or perhaps visions of patients he understood as coming again in the future. Operating through "his feeling of

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during an exhibition at the Italian Cultural Institute (ICI) in Addis Ababa , entitled, *Gera, Gedewon and Mezgebu*, April 2002.

<sup>41</sup> For more on building styles in Addis Ababa, please see, Dejene Habtemariam "Architecture in Addis Ababa", *Proceedings of the International Symposium for the Centenary of Addis Ababa*, eds. Bahru Zewde, Ahmed Zekeria, Tadesse Beyene, (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa: University of Addis Ababa Press, 1989)199-215.

empathy...his talismans constitute the topography of a hallucinated world”.<sup>42</sup> In this way Gedewon gave his talismans “a new lease on life”,<sup>43</sup> a lease generated not by an effort at originality or autonomy but through recourse to a practice that seems to be more rhetorical than aesthetic. Rather than becoming a demiurge, Gedewon invoked the names of the various demiurge to create visions that were suited for his time and place: for his circumstances. If modernism attempts to be rid of the horizon line, Gedewon’s work understands that at the limit point of the horizon are the Names of God, and therefore a tax and a tribute. Thus, Gedewon’s works do not attempt to create a new language, but refine the use of rhetorical devices and so awe the audience through being a virtuoso of these devices. Here the meaning of *Telsam* seems to regain all of its meanings: it is *effective object, Name of God, ritual, tax or tribute*.

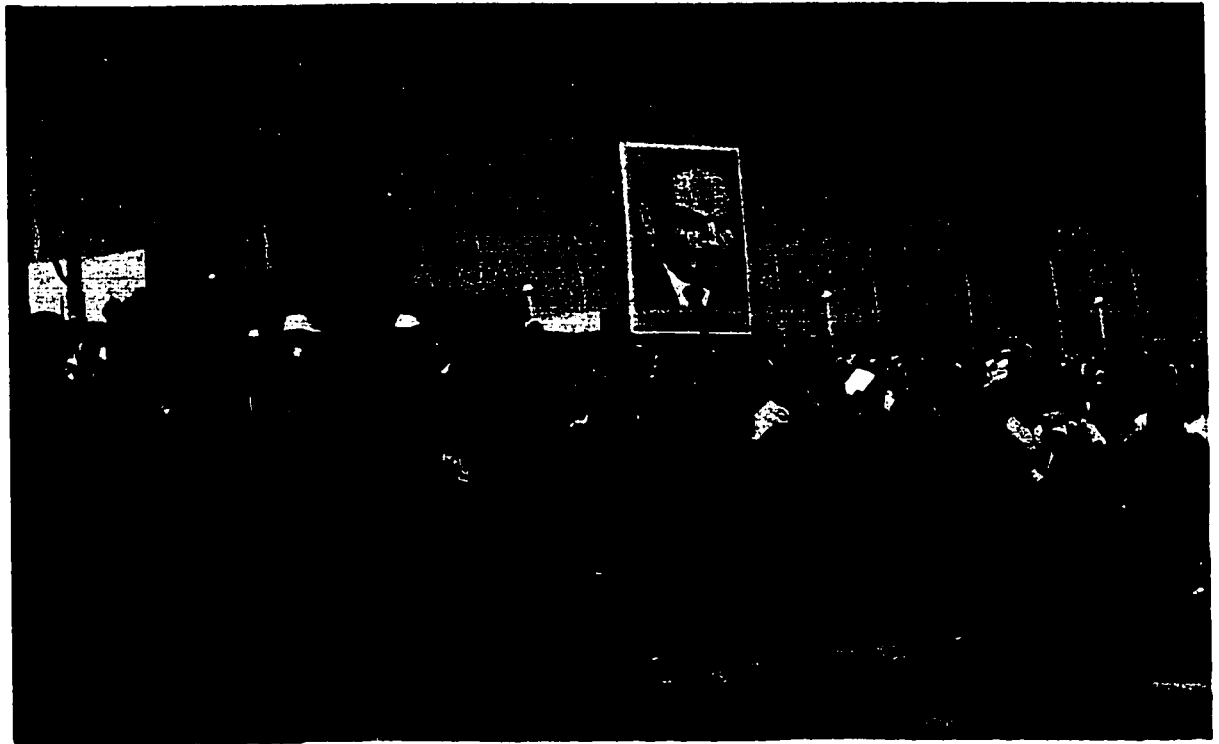
Boris Groys has written that the Sots artist remains ambivalent towards pluralism because pluralism assumes incommensurability between different points of view. The Sots artist can only read in the insistence on having one’s own point of view a ritual performance of individuation. Such a performance taken to its extreme is what Stalinism is. If Gedewon has had an experience of some form of Stalinism, his modernity like the Sots artist is one where he reinvents himself — albeit unwittingly into a social psychologist “that does not distinguish between self and others, between personal and political history”.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Gera, Gedewon and Mezgebu* 2.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid* 2.

<sup>44</sup> Groys 94.



**Fig. 5 Portrait of Lenin, done in the early days of the revolution. Photo, courtesy of the Ethiopian Tourism Commission.**

So far, in following Groys' elaboration of Socialist Realism we have come to insinuate a connection between the rise of art, the rise of the autonomous self and the rise of modernity. Moreover, we have attempted to show that what connects these three factors finds its apotheosis in Socialist Realism. Groys, of course is not the only thinker to link the rise of art to the rise of modernity, in addition to the rise of the autonomous self. From Schiller to Adorno this connection has been well established. However, Groys may be the first to have articulated the consequences of their connection in such an insightful manner. Indeed, the seminal text, *Theory of the Avant-garde* by Peter Burger builds on the tradition that follows from Schiller to Adorno, and argues for much of what

Groys has argued. However, where Burger finds it possible to celebrate the arrival of autonomy, art and modernity, Groys finds terror.<sup>45</sup>

Self-consciously following Burger's groundbreaking text is the much more elaborate work, written by Terry Eagleton and entitled, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. In this book, Eagleton argues that what defines us as modern is the forging of the autonomous self. Moreover, Eagleton claims that the autonomous self is maintained through the discourse of the aesthetic.<sup>46</sup> What this claim can confirm for us is that the place where aesthetics and politics meet in modernity is not only in the aestheticizing of politics as is the case for the streets of Addis Ababa but more importantly in the maintenance of the autonomous self. Let us then, briefly examine Eagleton's argument so that we may in fact confirm what we have, until now, only insinuated.

Aesthetic discourse, according to Eagleton, was born at the moment when the middle-class in Europe began to usurp power from the nobility. Using reason as its most powerful weapon, the middle-class struggle for political hegemony threatened to alienate itself from the power it sought by allowing the lived experience of its subjects to fall outside its domain. Indeed, the problem that this posed raised a number of serious questions such as: "how can you have a ruling rationality that knows nothing of its concepts" or "should the body be given up as the unthinkable other of thought?"<sup>47</sup>

Thus Eagleton claims that when Alexander Baumgarten takes up these questions, as one of the first thinkers of the aesthetic, he is not attempting to delineate a line between art and life. Rather, the aesthetic refers to the whole region of human perception

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Burger, *Theory of The Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See in particular the chapter, "On the Problem of the Autonomy of Art in Bourgeois Society".

and sensation. Baumgarten's project is to mark the difference between the material and the immaterial and theorize a point of mediation between the generalities of reason and the particulars of sense. The project takes as its starting place the recognition that the world of perception and experience cannot simply be derived from abstract universal laws, but demands its own appropriate discourse and displays its own inner, if inferior logic".<sup>48</sup> In this way a poem for Baumgarten is the perfect form of sensate discourse, bringing the rational down to the particular and communicating its meaning through the body. Here, then, aesthetic units are "open to rational analyses, though they demand a specialized form or idiom of reason".<sup>49</sup> This specialized form or analyses is aesthetic discourse.

The aesthetic, then, allows a doubling back of reason through sensation so that reason does not become a kind of knowledge that is separate from the liberated subject. Indeed, Eagleton shows through his reading of Baumgarten, and later through Kant, that what is at stake in the aesthetic is a subject "which like the work of art itself discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity, rather than in some oppressive external power".<sup>50</sup> Here the problem is one where, in knowledge we recognize each other as objects and in morality we recognize each other as autonomous subjects, and yet this is not enough to form the basis of a universal subjectivity.

In aesthetic judgement, then, we agree that an object is beautiful or sublime. This demonstrates that the world is somehow designed to suit our capacities but it also

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<sup>46</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of The Aesthetic* (London and New York: Blackwell, 1990). See especially the fabulist tale Eagleton tells about the arrival of modernity in his chapter, "From the Polis to Postmodernism", 366.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid* 14.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid* 15.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid* 15.

establishes a community of feeling subjects and a form of inter-subjectivity linked through our shared capacities — “what brings us together is not knowledge but an ineffable reciprocity of feeling”.<sup>51</sup> What happens in aesthetic judgement is not a more intimate knowledge of an object — since what we know is always from our partial perspective — but a moment of self-estrangement where we begin to understand our capacity’s relationship to self-estrangement. Here, beauty allows us an experience of our shared capacities but the sublime reminds us of our partial perspective — that the world is an infinite totality that is not ours to know. What we glimpse in the aesthetic, is how unaesthetic our true freedom really is. Later, as the aesthetic takes on a more explicitly political role, the work it does is negotiate a point between our barbaric senses (beauty) and our potential to form civil society by mediating a point whereby a feeling for what we have in common (the sense of estrangement produced by experiencing the aesthetic) compels us to reason together.

In tracing the way aesthetic discourse has developed from Kant to Schiller, to Hegel to Marx to Freud, through to contemporary philosophers, Eagleton claims that what he is tracing is “the forging of the ego”.<sup>52</sup> He also claims (and for now we will take him to be right), that what he is tracing is an engagement with the work of Kant. If he recognizes the ambivalent nature of this project he does not therefore question it in its entirety but places his faith in the aesthetic. Indeed, Eagleton argues the role aesthetic judgement comes to play in Kant’s philosophy is the very description of the ideological, for what is the ideological except that which claims that it is not and at the same time, links the concrete particular with the universal in an inexplicable way. Similarly, we see

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid* 19.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid* 75.

that in aesthetic judgement the subject remains in his or her own state, yet is raised to the universal. What is subjective is also a universal law. Yet, if the aesthetic is for Eagelton the very model of the ideological, it is not to be dismissed for this reason. Rather, it is Eagelton's concern to show that what is useful in the aesthetic is an altruistic gesture whereby desire is bracketed in favour of placing one's self in the shoes of the Other. Aesthetic judgement at the very least attempts its departure point in view of the universal and so always includes a vision of the Other. Yet, as Groys has argued, and as Eagelton himself shows the problem of how to relate to the Other only arises if one maintains that such a thing as the liberated subject exists. Without the liberated subject, we would not need the aesthetic but without the aesthetic we would not have a liberated subject.

We have already seen that Eagelton's gesture towards the Other is the gesture Groys describes as modernism. In this way, we can say Groys and Eagelton agree. However, this is probably all they would agree upon. While Eagelton's reading of the aesthetic allows him to rescue it from damnation, Groys shows that the aesthetic gesture towards the Other always assumes a self that is prior to social relations: a self that is extra-temporal and extra-spatial. More importantly such an assumption as Groys has shown is the epistemological and ontological operators of what lies at the heart of Stalinism — terror lies with the one who thinks he is an individual (before social relations, extra-temporal and extra-spatial) and so causes harm to his relations.

Thus, through our reading of Agamben and Foucault we can link Groys to Eagelton and to our guide's feelings of non-existence. This is because we understand that an ambition that attempts to forge memory's ego can only lead to memory's demise, yet, through Eagelton we also know that the forging of the ego is intimately tied to the

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid* 381.

aesthetic. However, memory wants to be *ritual, effective object, tribute, and tax*. To be otherwise would be to relate to the Other in a way that maintains an unacknowledged *will to power* that is potentially terroristic to the Other but also to our guide's own self.<sup>53</sup>

Alternatively, in his 1992, Nobel lecture, Derek Walcott, offers a description of the process of making poetry that contrasts sharply with modernist notions of the aesthetic. In terms that appear to be very Foucaultian, Walcott asks (in such a way that also makes a claim), "if there is such a thing as imagination as opposed to the collective memory of our entire race?"

Poetry, which is perfection's sweat but which must seem as fresh as the raindrops on a statue's brow, combines the natural and the marmoreal; it conjugates both tenses simultaneously: the past and the present, if the past is the sculpture and the present the beads of dew or rain on the forehead of the past. There is the buried language and there is the individual vocabulary, and the process of poetry is one of excavation and of self-discovery. Tonally the individual voice is a dialect; it shapes its own accent, its own vocabulary and melody in defiance of an imperial concept of language [...].<sup>54</sup>

Poetry, then is the fashioning of collective memory. But if this is the process of making poetry it is also for Walcott a description of life. Given what we know, the question thus becomes what happens to life and collective memory when a notion of individuality, beyond history and time, powerful as a tiger, confronts them with a roar?

This question is more or less answered in Pierre Nora's essay "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire." Here, Nora suggests that as we become more and

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<sup>53</sup> I understand that by talking about the modern Subject and the Kantian Subject in the manner that I do, I am introducing a possible contradiction into the over all argument of this thesis. The contradiction stems from my use of Alfonso Lingis, (a neo-Kantian to be sure) to ground my methodological approach. To my mind, however, Lingis offers us a somewhat alternative reading of Kant, a reading in any case, that differs from the dominant inheritance of Kant today. Alternatively, the strength and perhaps the weakness of Eagleton is that he offers a reading of the Kantian subject as a cultural object that does a certain kind of work as we have grown to experience modernity.

<sup>54</sup> Derek Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory*, December 3, 2001, <[www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html](http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html)>

more modern, the “milieux de memoire” that generate and transmit memory are destroyed in favour of memory, scientifically presented as history:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and revived. History on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete of what is no longer.<sup>55</sup>

Memory released from its mileux, can now float as free as the modern subject. Life, founded on the Subject, is no longer authored by the world but is powerful as a tiger. As history, it is antithetical to the spontaneous places that produce it and so it destroys them.

We may be reminded at this point of the story of Simonides, the so-called founder of the art of memory. It has been passed down to us that Simonides was able to found mnemotechnics after discovering that if memory is to be recalled it needs to be ordered through a place in which it can lodge itself.<sup>56</sup> Escaping a banquet where all of the guests were killed when the eating hall fell in, Simonides was able to later identify all of the unrecognizable dead bodies because he remembered the places where each guest sat. It is this event we are told that indicated to Simonides that place was an essential part of ordering memory. One wonders if Simonides lived in modernity, perhaps in Addis-Ababa; without his mileux de memoire, would he be able to name the dead bodies? And if, as John Berger has so aptly put it, “the dead are the imagination of the living”,<sup>57</sup> how do the living now live? At the very least, we know that some including memory must now doubt their existence.

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<sup>55</sup> Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire*. Representations. ns 26. 7-25 (spring 89): 8.

<sup>56</sup> See especially, Chapter one and two in Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1966/2000).

<sup>57</sup> John Berger, *And Our faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Vintage International, 1991) 15.

If, Walter Benjamin understood that there was an important difference between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics,<sup>58</sup> for the residents of Addis Ababa, this difference must be miniscule indeed. The questions they must ask of modernity and modernism, aesthetics and politics are altogether different. Yet, as modernity has just now reached its apex in Addis Ababa, Gedewon shows us a different approach to it; place undoubtedly remains in tension with space. Yet, for most of the residents of Addis Ababa, the cult of the individual is having an infectious impact. Whether the Addis Ababa residents will be able to effectively deal with this infection depends on a number of factors. However, one factor that seems apparent is that a renewal of *Telsam* in all its conceptual multiplicity will sustain the residents of Addis Ababa for much longer than the city's increasingly rapid turn to the aesthetic.

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We started off this chapter by asking how to account for the transformation of the billboard-like artistic productions of Marx, Lenin and Engels into talismanic forms. We took their transformation as a synecdoche for a larger process of Addis Ababa's confrontation with the modern. As such, we attempted to break the billboards of Addis Ababa into their performative parts. We asked; what is memory and history; aesthetics and politics; place and space in the context of post-revolutionary Addis Ababa. We

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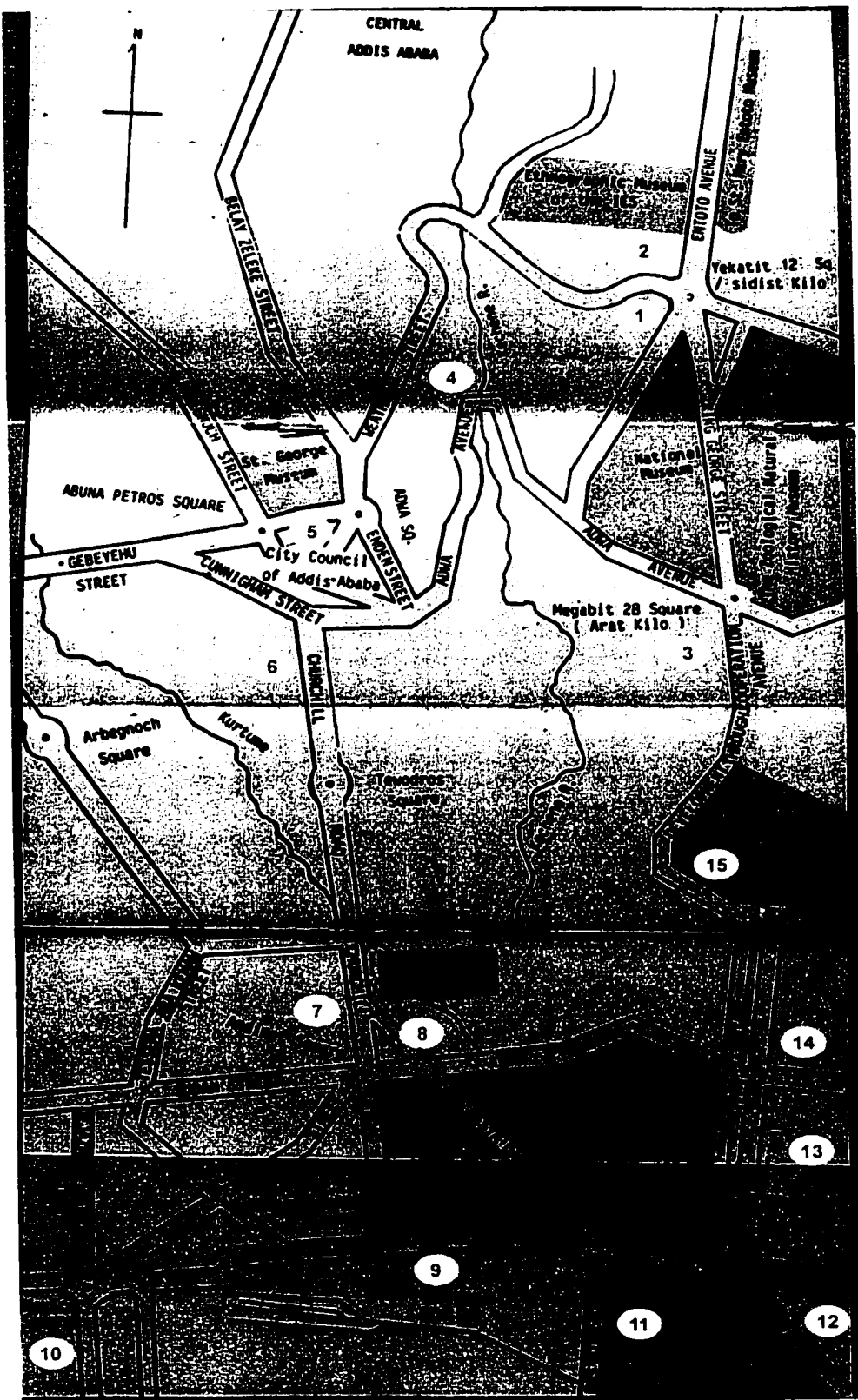
<sup>58</sup> That Benjamin thought the difference between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics important is made clear in reference to Mussolini's war machine. Benjamin writes: All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war [...]. It goes without saying that the fascist apotheosis of war does not employ such arguments. Still Marinetti says in his manifesto on the Ethiopia colonial war: for twenty-seven years we futurists have rebelled against the branding of war as anti-aesthetic... Accordingly we state:... war is beautiful [...].

[...] Mankind which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian Gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of

understood memory as simultaneously being born of and bearing Addis Ababa, and as such we were able to show that memory is linked to place. But we also know that memory is the paths city dwellers make as they walk through the city. Yet, if this is so, *espace propre* must be more related to history (official, scientific narratives) Thus, by examining memory as it came to confront modernity on the streets of Addis Ababa we were able to gain a clearer understanding of Addis Ababa's inflection of modernity, and more precisely, a sense of the something the tactics of the passer-by rubs against. What we can say now is that some attempts at redefining modernity in Addis Ababa have been more successful than others. But lest we forget, our patient at the Black Lion Hospital was in hospital; famine, drought and war continue to be the name of his *espace propre*: diarrhea his tactic. And so it must have been for Gedewon. for in the end, despite one's ingenuity, *espace propre* is never really a matter of one's choosing. Indeed, despite their ingenuity, the residents of Addis Ababa have been up to a tragic conflict with modernity. In the next chapter, we will follow our guide through more concrete examples of how this tragic conflict has played itself out in the city of our interest. In Chapter Four will again take up the concept of *telsam*, along with that of the dialectical image in order to deepen our analyses of how we can build a procedure to address the tragedy of this tragic conflict.

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Mechanical Reproductions" in *Illuminations*, eds. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 241, 2.



**Fig 6. Map of Central Addis Ababa. Museums in Addis Ababa, map (Addis Ababa Region 14: Tourism Bureau, date unknown but no earlier than the present regime).**

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Tour: Originality is for Children and Kings<sup>1</sup>**

I am in a city very far from you. How far? Farther than the shape of the distance between you and I can ever stand to measure. And yet, here we are, I am writing to you now from the corner of my eye and you will see all that bursts through my heart; all that is worth seeing in me.

How I want to tell you of things that... How can I say it? How I want to guide you through streets that... How I want to tell you of things that have depth but not length. No, this is wrong. I want to tell you of things that are so ancient that their length has been transformed into sheer depth.

None of this is capturing what I want to say.

Failing.

Here, I am at the beginning, already failing at what I want to say. Nonetheless, I will carry on.

This is the city.

The way the people walk remains the same. No, I lie. All that remains the same is that people continue to walk. This is what astounds. The ability to walk. Here, people continue to walk and they continue to bring their mules, their donkeys, their cows and their sheep into town. And they walk. On their pack animals, they bring the wheat, the teff and the rye that will feed the residents of this city.

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<sup>1</sup>“Originality is for Children and Kings”, is an Amharic saying.

I am told that often an animal is put up for sale because the farmer is in trouble and he needs a little extra cash. This must be the case when an Ox is up for sale, for Oxen are used to plow the land. But sheep? Other than wool, what is a lamb good for? They are only good, because they can be sold.

There are many sheep yards around town. You can buy a sheep, take it home, hire a boy to help you skin it, and eat it fresh that same day. This is common. The sheep are tasty.

You are probably wondering, how I can talk of farmers and the slaughtering of animals, when I am writing about a city. But the tides of people that come in and out of this place are part of the city, and they are many. Early, each morning one can see farmers and herders entering the streets of Addis Ababa and for the rest of the day, depending on your luck and your attitude, you may be blocked for some time, waiting for the animals to cross the street.

I am told 3 million people live in this city. But the temporary residents must swell the population far beyond that number. And where do they sleep, after they have sold their wheat, their animals and some no doubt, have sold all their worldly possessions?

I was shocked last night when I walked through one of the main streets of this town, a street that in the past has been called a boulevard. It was dusk, when I started walking south, towards the main part of town and the light coming over the surrounding mountains had a certain quality. Blue. Hints of blue, covered everything. As I walked, I noticed that people were collecting themselves, their belongings, their cardboard, their gabbi (cotton blanket). They were making a bed for themselves on the wide sidewalk that

follows along this wide boulevard. A few hours later, returning up this same street, everything was quiet. Walking, I carefully navigated sleeping bodies.

It is unusual to find such wide pavement and therefore, so many bodies lying in a row in this city. But this is an unusual street.

### **The Street and its Environs**

I believe the official name of this street is “King George IV Avenue”.<sup>2</sup> But there have been other names. For instance, during the Italian Occupation it was called Via Prinipessa di Piemento<sup>3</sup>. And before that it must have been something else. I cannot be sure. In this city, it is hard to track down the history of street names. The residents, oblivious to the official names of streets continue to call them after what suits their sensibilities. And the officials, oblivious to the residents, never seem to post the names of the street on the street itself. As a result, in this city, you cannot use a map and expect the locals to know where you are going.

I have always called this street Sidist Kilo (Six Kilo). And as far as I can tell, that is what the users of this street have always called it. It is not that this street is six kilometres long. Rather, it is that this boulevard starts where six minor streets from six different parts of town converge at a round-about.

The Sidist Kilo round-about conveys everything one can imagine about grand boulevards. No matter which direction one enters the round-about area, starting from 200

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<sup>2</sup> See position 1 on map at the front of this chapter. Please note that the numbers on the map corresponds to stops along the tour we are embarking on. The numbers are not part of the original map but were added in the course of writing this Chapter.

metres away, one can see in a very open fashion, the Yekatit 12 Monument. This monument, which was erected sometime in the mid 1950's, commemorates those who died in a rebellion against Fascist Italy and consists of a "slender four sided marble shaft, tapering toward a point and surrounded by white marble steps [...]. Somewhat above the centre of the shaft, borne on a marble shelf across one corner, is a bronze effigy in the round of the traditional Lion of Judah, the emblem of Ethiopia [...]. At appropriate distances between the lion are two bands of bronze sculpture in high relief.... These sculptures depict the agony of the Ethiopian people during the war and the Italian occupation".<sup>4</sup>

The grandeur and suggestiveness of Sidist Kilo does not stop there. Just north of the round-about which gives the area its demotic name, is one of Haile-Selassie's old palaces; what is known as the Geunet Leul Palace. This palace was given to the people of Ethiopia by Haile-Selassie in the mid-1960's, to be used as the main campus of the first, secular university in Ethiopia; what was then called The Haile-Selassie I University and which is now called The University of Addis Ababa. The Geunet Leul Palace is not old. It was built in 1935 just in time to impress, a Swedish Prince visiting Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup>

Apparently, Haile Selassie, ever mindful of impressing Europeans with how advanced his

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<sup>3</sup> Bahru Zewde, "Early Safers of Addis Ababa: Patterns and Evolution", in *Proceedings of The International Symposium of Addis Ababa*. November 24-25, 1986, eds. Bahru Zewde, Ahmed Zekaria, Tadesse Beyene, (Addis Ababa: University of Addis Ababa Press, 1989) 53.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, "Addis Ababa Today". *Ethiopian Observer*. March 1957, vol 1, nos 2. : 45-53. In all of my descriptions of monuments in Addis Ababa, I have either quoted or at least maintained the language of the official descriptions. I have done this in order to convey some of the intentions of the officials who erected the monuments.

Sylvia Pankhurst was a good friend of Haile-Selassie. Moreover, the *Ethiopia Observer*, which she edited until her son took it over in 1962, was uncritical of Haile-Selassie's regime. Indeed, we can be sure that everything she wrote was intended to support Haile-Selassie's regime, and in particular its modernization program.

<sup>5</sup> The purpose of the palace is explained in, Ezekiel Gebissa, "Addis Ababa's Physical Growth: The contributions of some events and public occasions, 1930-74". Unpublished paper presented at *The*

country was did not find his former palace, located just down the boulevard on what is presently called Development Through Cooperation Avenue, suitable for a European prince.

The older palace that was rejected on the occasion of the visit of the Swedish Prince, was built at the turn of the twentieth century and reflects Ethiopia's confusion as to how exactly it should project its new found modernity. Aware that being modern means one must be international, this palace is an odd mix of Ethiopian, Middle-eastern, Indian and European architecture.<sup>6</sup> The Guenet Leul Palace, on the other hand, resembles any 19<sup>th</sup> century European bourgeois, grand mansion. Today, it houses the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the National Ethnographic Museum. In addition, the palace compound itself houses most of the undergraduate Social-Science faculties. These buildings, which in not so far off times housed the former workers of the ruling monarch, became the hot-bed of much of the radical socialist activity that eventually toppled Haile Selassie's regime during the 1974 revolution.<sup>7</sup>

If I walk south along King George IV Avenue grandeur amongst destitution, continues to be the nature of the landscape. I therefore see a conglomeration of institutions that claim to govern daily life in this city, and the country for which this city is the capital. I find: the main residence for the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the National Museum (which houses the bones of Lucy), the National Theological School, St Mary's Cathedral (one of the larger churches of the city), the School of Graduate Studies, the Ministry for Economic Development, the Zoological

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*International Symposium of Addis Ababa*. November 24-25, 1986. A copy of the paper can be found at the City Hall of Addis Ababa Public Library.

<sup>6</sup> See, Dejene Habte-Mariam, "Architecture in Addis Ababa", *Proceedings of The International Symposium of Addis Ababa* 199-215.

Museum and the Ministry of Education (Examination Section), itself housed in a tall, gray, triangular shaped modernist skyscraper. All of this I see in no more than 15 minutes.

### **Development Through Cooperation**

Reaching lower ground, Sidist Kilo joins Arat Kilo (Four Kilos), another avenue which begins with a round-about at the point where four streets converge. Arat Kilo is also home to a tall, slender, imposing monument: this one commemorating the liberation of Ethiopia from Italian occupation (1941).<sup>8</sup> The monument consists of a 15 metre long, slender stela, meant to recall the ancient stelae at Axum in northern Ethiopia.<sup>9</sup> Towards the bottom of the monument is a wide, supporting base that depicts through text and sculptural means the history of the Ethiopian liberation. When the monument was first built, the sculptural relief told the story of Haile-Selassie's entry into Addis Ababa and the country's subsequent liberation. However, the imagery was later changed by the Socialist regime to depict an ordinary partisan.<sup>10</sup>

Just below Arat Kilo is Development Through Cooperation Avenue. There I have found Parliament house. Built in 1930 by Haile Selassie, this measure of democracy was granted to the people, not because they demanded it, I have been told, but is a result of Haile Selassie's wish to make Ethiopia a modern state-nation.<sup>11</sup> Ethiopia's parliament

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<sup>7</sup> See position 2 on map at front of chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Position 3 on map.

<sup>9</sup> See Silvia Pankhurst, "Addis Ababa Today".

<sup>10</sup> Teklehaimanot Haile-Mariam. "Monuments in Addis Ababa" in *Culture Magazine of The Ministry of Information and Culture*, 1996, vol unknown, number unknown [the original article was published in Amharic, free trans. Zeleke Bekele]: 17.

<sup>11</sup> See, Haile-Selassie's speech to Government Officials on their roles and responsibilities in April 1961. In this speech, Haile-Selassie is keen to remind his officials that Parliament was granted to them by their

building is small but with its lighted clock tower it conjures Westminster, “the mother of all parliaments”.<sup>12</sup>

Following Haile Selassie’s lead but in a far more radical modernist fashion, the Derg (Socialist regime) also made the area from Arat Kilo along Development Through Cooperation Avenue, the centre of much of its government activity. Thus, by the time the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution rolled around it had built in Socialist Realist style a Congress Hall of the Workers People of Ethiopia right next to Parliament building.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the Derg built a few other modernist buildings where important political work was carried out. Today, these buildings continue to be used by the present regime to carry out the business of governance. Development Through Cooperation Avenue is therefore a high security zone. Here, there are no sleeping bodies. At night, all that is demotic disappears in favour of pure space.

The Sidist Kilo, Arat Kilo stretch, down through Development Through Cooperation Avenue is well known for the political demonstrations that erupt from time to time in Addis Ababa. Each regime has had to contend with its opponents, often with violence in this high security zone. Thus with each regime, the area is often decorated with flags and other suitable images of patrimony. During the time of the Derg, the Arat Kilo area, in particular was decorated with rainbows, Socialist Realist style portraits of the party leader, Marx, Lenin and Engels portraits, as well as political slogans. These days, other than the State buildings, the only other object lit throughout the night is the huge billboard space adjacent to the Yekatit 12 monument; owned by the Mono 2000

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benevolent Emperor. The speech was republished as “The Emperor on Ministerial Responsibility”. *Ethiopian Observer*, vol V, nos 2, 1961: 98.

<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, “The Changing Face of Addis Ababa”, *Ethiopian Observer*, vol IV, nos 5. June 1960: 155.

company and currently rented to Coca-Cola. For twenty-fours a day, seven days a week, one can catch a glimpse of well dressed, modernized Abyssinians being doused with refreshing brown liquid. However, given that a bottle of Coca-Cola costs one Ethiopian dollar (Birr) and given the average annual per capita income of the country is 1,600 Birr, this billboard must suggest a sense of the terribly impossible, much in the same way as the Socialist billboards once did. Terribly impossible, because these billboards demonstrate wordly power that can be yours (after all, you are of the world) but in fact only belongs to the small group of people whose income bumps the national average to its present levels.

### **Drinking and Interpreting**

It could be that my interpretation is overwrought. At a bar one night in the spring of 2002, a fellow drinker explained to me that the images produced by Mono 2000 and other billboard companies, demonstrated the variety of goods produced in Ethiopia and so made him feel proud of his country. Mono 2000 and Socialist Realism were not so far apart in this young man's mind; both promoted images of patrimony, of all that was good in Ethiopia. Indeed, if the young man had a quarrel, it was that the present regime did not put up enough posters and billboards to make the residents of Addis Ababa feel good about their city and their country. The young man was nostalgic for the socialist regime, a time when Ethiopia was not bothered with ethnic problems and the streets of Addis Ababa were clean.

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<sup>13</sup> Kifle Djote. "Addis Ababa on The Eve of Party Formation", *Ethiopian Herald* September 8<sup>th</sup> 1984, vol 39, nos 608: 5.

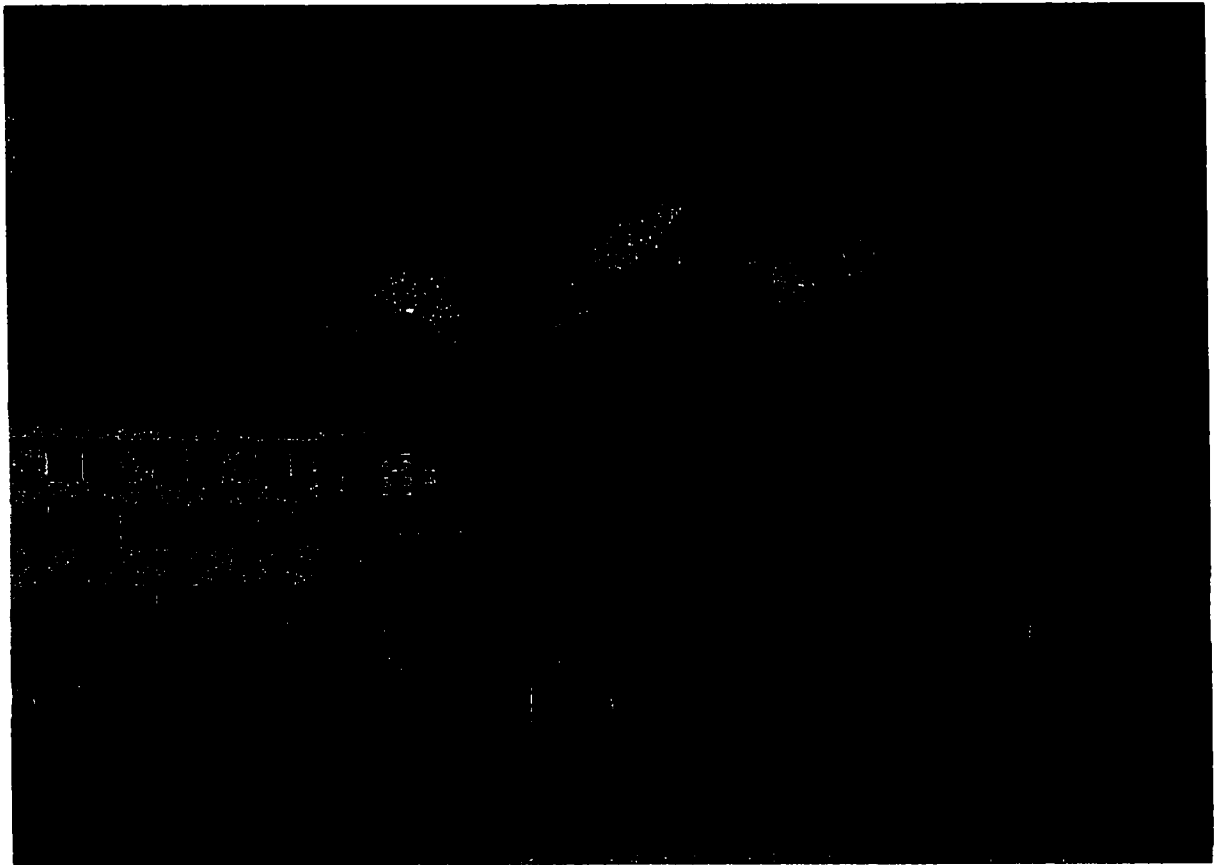
My fellow drinker was born just before the time of the socialist revolution. He went to school and was raised under the Derg regime. What he remembers is that in Addis Ababa, when he was growing up everyone was guaranteed a job, a house, and a minimum income. Everyone was proud, they had purpose and the country was united. Now, he asks, what do we have, who can we look up to? And turning to a neighbour drinking from a bottle of whisky, he lets me know that his entire month's salary would be spent if he bought five bottles of the favoured drink of the Addis-Ababa middle class.

There was little I could say to all this. I did suggest that he might consider that unity in the capital city was fostered by a centralized regime based in Addis Ababa that was constantly engaged in wars against its rural based citizens. While everyone was guaranteed jobs in Addis, the rest of the country was either fighting a guerilla war against the socialist regime or simply buckling at the knees from poverty. His response was ambivalent. He asked if things were different now? And if they were not, which regime did a more efficient job? Besides war is the price of nation building. Who could argue with such sentiments? On the other hand, I am not sure Ethiopia's problems should be reduced to a question of efficiency and so I changed the subject, moved to a table in another area of the bar, continued drinking.

Later, I struck up a conversation with another man, this time older, grayer, but drinking whisky. Hoping for a little vindication, I repeated what the young man had just said to me. I then asked the old man what he thought of the changes to the Addis Ababa landscape. His response was that he did not recall the changes as he spent most of the seventeen years of the Derg regime in a prison cell that held reactionaries and other opponents of Scientific Socialism. Indeed, he thought my question rather frivolous. I

spent the rest of the night obliged to listen to stories of torture and other horrors of prison life in Ethiopia. But a secret bond tied the young man to the old man. Despite favouring certain traits of one regime or the other, ambivalence tempered their interpretations.

But to come back to Arat Kilo for just a moment, I want to tell you that today, Arat Kilo's northerly wall in the round-about area is commonly used to post jobs, unsold newspapers, courses at private boutique type colleges, and other community issues. Late in the afternoons I see crowds gathering to read. Sometimes, they scare me and I begin to understand why a government may also be scared of these groupings. There are so many of them, reading together.



**Fig. 7 Arat Kilo during the time of the Derg. Photo, Kebede Bogale. Position 3 on map.**

## **Monuments and Modernity**

In the early stages of this tour of Addis Ababa, it must have already become obvious to you that Italy has left a dramatic mark on the development of the city. Ethiopia has no tradition of wide boulevards, monument building, or symmetrical cities designed along a north-south axis. If, especially in the post-Mussolini period, Addis Ababa attempted to resemble a modern European city, more than Gondar or Harer, it is because it had direct contact with European city design as well as European forms of governance. The father of modern architecture, Le Corbusier, in fact, created the first official Master Plan of Addis Ababa for Fascist Italy.<sup>14</sup> Later much of his plans were adapted and implemented by the Italian architects and urban planners, I Giudi and C. Valle.<sup>15</sup> Since the fascist period, with every regime, a new Master Plan and sometimes two or three Master Plans are created and implemented, though never to completion. But the Italian impact is more than this. Certainly, the fact that nearly every monument on Addis Ababa's wide avenues commemorates some aspect of the various wars with the Italians testifies to their enduring presence.

Monument building flies in the face of the usual Ethiopian processes of dealing with memory. Indeed, in the years immediately preceding the centenary anniversary of the Battle of Adwa (see Chapter One), a group of Ethiopian citizens, based mostly in Addis Ababa began to plan various events to commemorate the Ethiopian victory against Colonial Italy. Some of the activities that the group planned included the erecting of new

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<sup>14</sup> See Tesheste Ahderom, "Historical Development of the Preparation of Master Plans for Addis Ababa". Unpublished paper presented *The International Symposium of Addis Ababa*, November 24-25, 1986. A copy of the paper can be found at the City Hall of Addis Ababa Public Library.

monuments in places of significance to the battle. The group was particularly interested in building a monument in the town of Adwa itself, a small, dusty place in Northern Ethiopia. In the initial stages of planning for the monument, it was decided that members of the group would travel to Adwa and look for the burial ground of fallen soldiers. Based on what they found there, they would then propose a plan for a monument to be erected near one of the burial sites. Arriving in Adwa, the group could not find marked graves nor any other visible sign that this place had been the scene of the event that propelled Ethiopia onto the global stage.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, oral and written stories abound.

If the group could find no physical evidence of the battle it is because the practice of marking graves or visibly and permanently commemorating someone's life is a late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century addition to the landscape of Ethiopia. Traditionally, when one dies, one is buried in a grave that is not marked in any permanent manner. What is more important is the extremely elaborate mourning process that takes place in the *luckso bete* (a place where people collect to mourn). Here, when someone dies, friends, relatives, neighbours and whomever feels like crying gather over regularly scheduled periods of time for a tremendous amount of crying and beating of the chest. Here, it seems to me, memory is not transformed into history but takes on multiple meaning for each member involved in this collective process.

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<sup>15</sup> Only 20 percent of their plan had been implemented by the time the Italian occupation ended. And most of it was bombed to bits by the Italians in an act of revenge, just before the occupation ended. See, Ezekiel Gebissa. Also see, Bahru Zewde, "Early Safers of Addis Ababa".

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Eshete, a member of the organizing committee, related the anecdote to me quite casually. At the time of writing this thesis I was unable to contact Andreas in order to gather the proper name of the organizing committee. Andreas was key to having the Minilik monument restored, as well he is known in Ethiopia as being active in issues related to patrimony, historical objects, and monuments.

In the end, then, unable to find anything that could be marked, the group planning the centenary anniversary celebrations decided against building a monument in Adwa. Unfortunately, Addis Ababa has not been the recipient of such humility.

Rather, when I travel west after reaching Arat Kilo I pass the Berhane-Selam Printing Press (Light and Peace Printing Press), the Ras Mekonnen bridge<sup>17</sup> and in approximately thirty minutes time, I end up in the area sometimes known as Piazza, at other times known as Arada, and other times, simply called the City Hall Area.<sup>18</sup> Here, I find the recently restored monument of Minilik II: founder of Addis Ababa, leader of the Battle of Adwa and founder of Modern Ethiopia.

Standing in sharp contrast to the traditional effort against permanently monumentalizing memory, the group planning celebrations for the centenary anniversary of Adwa day felt little hesitation in dedicating money and resources to restoring the Minilik II monument in the heart of Addis Ababa. This monument was originally erected in 1930, on the same day that Haile Selassie was crowned the third Emperor of Modern Ethiopia. Unlike any other in Ethiopia, Haile-Selassie's coronation was specifically prepared for visiting guests from around the world, and in particular from Europe. The unveiling of the monument was thus an integral part of the showing up of Ethiopia against Europe.

During the occupation of Fascist Italy in Addis Ababa (1936-1941), the Minilik monument was taken down and buried in an unmarked grave. It was later found and restored. During the fall of the Derg regime (1991), apparently a group of Oromo people (non-Ge'ez speaking people), opposed to the territorial integrity of modern Ethiopia,

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<sup>17</sup> Position 4 on map.

<sup>18</sup> Position 5 on map.

attempted to pull the monument down once more.<sup>19</sup> What is surprising, however, is that unlike the previously mentioned roundabouts, no one has dared hang commercial or political billboards in close proximity to this monument.

The Minilik monument was the first of its kind to be erected in Ethiopia. Made of copper, in Germany, in Rococo style, the monument portrays Minilik as an equestrian. According to a recent article written for a magazine published by the Ministry of Information and Culture the message the monument conveys to the onlooker is “Italians I am catching up with you”.<sup>20</sup> Yet, if this is the message of this monument, perhaps it can be said that this is the message meant to be conveyed by the city of Addis Ababa in general.

It can be argued that the oldest monument in Ethiopia is the 1930 Minilik monument. This, of course would be a hotly contested statement. One could immediately point out the stelae in the province of Tigre that are dated as being 3000 years old or one may point out the many castles, churches, mosques and synagogues that lie as ruins throughout Ethiopia. Often the nearly 1000 year old structures in Lalibella are called monuments. But none of these structures were built to commemorate a person or an event. These are structures that people, ate, drank, and prayed in. Moreover, many of these structures continue to be places where people make their homes. It is only a modern tourist industry that calls these sites monuments. To be sure, only in Addis Ababa is there such a vast array of monuments built simply to mark an event or a person. Only in Addis

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<sup>19</sup> The event was reported in “The Year That Was”, *Yekatit* Vol XV, nos 3. March 1992: 5

<sup>20</sup> Teklehaimanot Haile-Mariam 17.

Ababa is there a modernist attempt to privilege space over place. Only in Addis Ababa is there an attempt to favour the monumental over the groove of the passer-by.

In the background of the Minilik monument stands St George's Cathedral, one of the city's oldest churches. In the foreground stands the very imposing City Hall. Addis Ababa's City Hall was designed by the Eritrean-based, Italian architecture firm Studio Mezzedimi, sometime in the 1960's. Perched on a hill, it is composed of a slender tower in the middle that overlooks the town and which is flanked by symmetrical wings on either side.<sup>21</sup> Climbing to the top of the City Hall tower, one can see all of Addis Ababa. Looking from any point below, one can see the slender tower of City Hall. During the time of the Derg, this tower was often decorated with an image that would urge the people toward building a Socialist nation.

The circular area enclosed by City Hall and St George's Cathedral and centred around the Minilik Monument has, in the past ten years or so, become a favourite place for Addis Ababa's displaced residents to make a home for themselves. Unlike the sleeping bodies one navigates in Sidist Kilo, the homes here have a more permanent feel to them even if the materials used in construction are less than sturdy. It is hard to know which area is more disturbing. One thing for sure is that the modernist gestures that surround these displaced people seem that much, more modern, monumental and ostentatious than they would anywhere else.

Arada, Piazza or the City Hall area has other stories. Arada is the Oromo word for market.<sup>22</sup> And the area was apparently used for such an activity even before Minilik and his court settled in Addis Ababa, displacing and assimilating the earlier inhabitants.

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<sup>21</sup> Dejene Habte-Mariam 207, 208

During the Minilik period Arada continued to be a commercial zone, though this time with a more cosmopolitan flavour.<sup>23</sup> During the Italian Occupation, all Ethiopians, be they, Oromo, Amhara, Tigrean, etc, were removed from this area and it became a White only section of town. The Italians, however, did allow the locals to reopen a market for themselves in the South-Western part of the city and so moved the growth of Addis Ababa in that direction.<sup>24</sup>

There are a number of ways to get to the southern section of town from the Piazza area. One could follow the numerous small and broken roads that lead away from Arada or one could follow what is often referred to in the literature on Addis Ababa as the monumental axis. This North-South axis, is also called Churchill Road.<sup>25</sup> It stretches out from City Hall and ends on much flatter ground, at the Railway Station that departs daily for the Red Sea and that was built in 1929, by the Frenchman, Paul Barrias.<sup>26</sup>

### **Monuments, Modernity and the Derg Regime**

At the bottom of Churchill Road, just before arriving at the Addis Ababa Railway Station lies the Derg built, Our Struggle Monument.<sup>27</sup> This monument was erected for the tenth anniversary of the revolution and rests on a total area of 30,000 square metres. It has three parts. There is a tall front column, which along with a star at the top is 50 metres high. At 30 metres high is placed a replica of The Socialist Ethiopia Hero's Medal

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<sup>22</sup> Dagmawit Misttir. "Origins of Place Names in Addis Ababa". *The Reporter*. Wednesday, February 13, 2002. vol VI, nos 284: 9-13.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Pankrust *The History of Ethiopian Towns From the Mid Nineteenth Century to 1935*.

<sup>24</sup> Bahru Zewde, *Early Safers of Addis Ababa* 50.

<sup>25</sup> Position 6 on map.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the railway see, Richard Pankrust, *The History of Ethiopian Towns From the Mid Nineteenth Century to 1935*. The railway station is marked as position 9 on map.

<sup>27</sup> Position 7 on map.

and with a diameter of 2.70 metres high, weighs in at 700 kgs. In front of the column is “a 20 ton relief, depicting all those who fought for the defense and unity of the country”. At either side of the relief is a left and right tableaux. The left tableaux, depicts the misery and suffering of the Ethiopian people before the Revolution and the right tableaux, depicts, the leader of the Derg, Mengistu Haile-Mariam with a cross section of the Ethiopian people, laying down the foundations of Socialism.<sup>28</sup> Stretching out from the tableaux is a wide water fountain. During the heyday of the monument’s use, this fountain area came to be known by a variety of names including, The People’s Lavatory. This made sense; water was flowing, and as we know from rivers, water washes waste away. Where the waste ends up, has never, until recent times, had to be a question. Addis Ababa’s mostly rural raised population thus took it upon themselves to similarly put Our Struggle’s water fountain to use. A health hazard like no other, Our Struggle Monument was eventually fenced off from the public. Today the water fountain is never turned on.

The inaugural celebrations for Our Struggle Monument was attended by Comrade Konstantin Cherenko, General Secretary of the Central Party of the Soviet Union, as well as a comrade whose name I cannot recall but was most definitely the President of the presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. Arap Moi, Prime-Minister of Kenya was also in attendance. As mentioned before, the inauguration was part of a general celebration for the tenth anniversary of the revolution. However, this anniversary also marked the transition from a Provisional Military Government to a genuine Workers Party of Ethiopia, even though all of the old officials continued to occupy positions created by the new party. The dignitaries inaugurating Our Struggle, therefore had a busy schedule.

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<sup>28</sup> Details of the monument have been culled from, Ethiopian News Agency, “Tiglachin, Karl Marx Monument Inaugurated”, *Ethiopian Herald*, September 12. 1984, vol 40, nos 2: 1,11,13,15.

They also had to inaugurate a Lenin monument on Minilik II Boulevard, and a Karl Marx monument, across from the Guenet Leul Palace at Sidist Kilo.<sup>29</sup>

“The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution transformed Addis Ababa.”<sup>30</sup> All commercial signs were removed from the streets, and slums were blocked off from view by miles of painted tin.<sup>31</sup> In addition, public squares and monuments were erected, construction of new buildings were finalized, colourful electric lights depicting the tri-colours of the Ethiopian flag were put up all over the city, new portraits of Marx, Lenin and Engels were erected at nearly every important juncture in the city, and “Churchill road itself was lined with statues and beautifully illuminated”.<sup>32</sup> Apparently, “the decoration and installations [... had] been designed not to serve temporary objectives but to remain as they are permanently, so as to serve all future purposes”.<sup>33</sup> Most striking, about the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, however, were the men and women, “deployed in all directions, in smashing brand new uniforms, and strolling the city in couples and triples, to maintain order and discipline”.<sup>34</sup> With the creation of a Workers Party, militiamen in uniform were no longer required to patrol the streets, the powers that be could now rely on ordinary citizens, dressed in Blue — the uniform of the proletariat.

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<sup>29</sup> Again these facts have been culled from, Ethiopian News Agency. “Tiglachin, Karl Marx Monument Inaugurated”.

<sup>30</sup> Kifle Djote 5.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Henze, *Layers of Time*, (London: Christopher Hurst and Company, 2000) 306.

<sup>32</sup> Kifle Djote 5.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid* 5.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* 5.



**Fig. 8 Billboard-painting created by North Korean and Ethiopian artists for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution. Notice the passerby below the painting. Photo, Berit Sahlstrom.<sup>35</sup>**

And where are the permanent monuments, portraits and lighting fixtures that the Derg erected? Erased, disappeared? I recently found the 1984 statue of Lenin, lying on its back in a garage run by the Addis Ababa Municipality. Surrounded by weeds and empty red and yellow oil drums, marked "Shell", the workers in the garage warned me that I should not wake Lenin up. But his sleep did not seem tranquil. He could have been easily disturbed. I bent over him; the oil drums spoke back. One can imagine what they said.

I had also been told that I might be able to find some of the portraits and billboards erected during the Derg regime lying next to Lenin at the city garage. I found

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<sup>35</sup> Photo reproduced from Berit Sahlstrom, *Political Posters in Ethiopia and Mozambique: Visual Imagery in a Revolutionary Context* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1990) 128.

nothing. And no one was willing to advise me further on this search. I gave up; seeing Lenin on his back was enough.

Rumour about town has it that the Lenin monument was constructed from the copper of the coins disposed of when the Derg took over from Haile-Selassie's regime. Could this rumour be true? As far as I know, the Lenin monument was a gift from the Soviet Union. Why would Ethiopia ship its old coins to the Soviet Union, only to have it returned in the form of a Lenin monument? The rumour does make a good story though and indicates new lines and new metaphors for thinking about the fall of the various regimes in modern Ethiopian; the supposedly old and outdated is shipped out, and then re-imported as a value added, foreign made object.



**Fig. 9 Our Struggle Monument, 1984.** In the background is the Black Lion Hospital. Photo, Kebede Bogale. Position 8 on map.

## **Erasure and Reinscription**

The Lenin monument was brought down in the early days of the fall of the Derg regime. A number of people, I am told, gathered to witness the monuments demise. But the intrigue was not with what might seem to be the obvious political message of the monument's fall, but with the technical know-how required to bring down such a large and heavy work. Unfamiliar with monumental and seemingly permanent structures, people were fascinated with modern capabilities for bringing down the permanent.

Our Struggle Monument has a different story. Today this monument remains in place, uncared for but still standing. Perhaps, the lesson learnt from the Lenin Monument is that it would be too expensive to move Our Struggle. Now, if the Derg monuments are to fall it must be by their own accord. However, always located at key areas of town, the Derg monuments can presently be viewed next to commercial signs, billboards and posters with entirely new and contrasting messages. It is uncanny. Where once these monuments would be situated next to a poster, a portrait or a slogan depicting some aspect of socialist life, now in a somewhat eerie twist, the hammer and sickle comfortably rots, next to a sign for Pepsi. However, for the passerby this twist must also throw the entire history of modern Ethiopia into relief. Like my young friend at the bar already suggested, ambivalence must be key to reading all of this.

One of the more interesting contrasts that the current situation in Addis Ababa has provoked is the Haile Gebre-Selassie wall hanging, just east of Our Struggle Monument at the crossroad known as Ambassador. The wall hanging is a larger than life, vinyl reproduction of Haile, famous for being the world's fastest, middle distance runner. At the top of the reproduction is the saying, "inechellalen", We can do it! Sponsored by US

AID (United States Assistance for International Development),<sup>36</sup> this very expensive contribution to the landscape of Addis Ababa, simultaneously reminds one of the Nike slogan, “Just do it” and the Derg efforts at nation building. The new nation building is now just that much, more individualistic — you must run on your own and leave every one else behind — and that much, more punishing — it is your fault if you don’t, just do it! Moreover, you are bringing the nation down when you, yes you, just don’t do it! Do what, one may ask, given that the residents of Addis Ababa have a hard time affording a collection of running shoes so that they can compel themselves to, “Just do it”. Needless to say, these questions did not enter the mind of those who monumentalized Haile Gebre-Selassie. Again, the contrast between old and new no longer seems so sharp. Addis Ababa’s governing regimes all address the residents with little concern for how they organize their daily life or even a consideration of the structural reality in which that life must be organized. And yet their address is so all pervasive.

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<sup>36</sup> The historian, Richard Pankhurst, imparted this fact to me. A credible source I am sure, however, I must state that I was never able to confirm the sponsorship with USAID. Wall hanging is position 9 on map.



**Fig. 10 Haile Gebre-Selassie wall hanging in downtown Addis Ababa, 2001.**  
Photo, Elleni Zeleke. Position 9 on map.

I have been told that the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary revolutionary aestheticization of Addis Ababa cost the Derg regime 50 million USD.<sup>37</sup> Shortly after the decorating had been completed, this same regime was forced to announce the famine that catapulted Ethiopia on to the international stage one more time. Presently, there is no cold war. As such, there seems to be no effective framework to allow a discourse of pity to re-present Ethiopia's continued poverty to the world. In Ethiopia, new billboards go up, old ones come down. Band-Aid indeed! The current solution, "Just do it"!

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<sup>37</sup> See, Donald Donham *Marxist Modern* 13.

## **Revolution After Revolution**

Before Churchill Road ends it meets the East-West axis at what is presently called Ras Mekonnen Avenue, but was earlier known as Field-Marshal Smuts Road.<sup>38</sup> When I turn East, I eventually end up at what is sometimes called Revolutionary Square and other times called Meskel (cross) Square. When I turn west I pass Mexico Square<sup>39</sup> and eventually end up in the old airport area, one of the more fashionable residential neighbourhoods in Addis Ababa. On my way to this posh part of town, I pass the headquarters for the Organization for African Unity and arriving at the cross roads that leads us towards the gentle folk of Addis Ababa I come across numerous signs for Embassies, International NGO's, Consulate Generals, beer, whisky and airline companies.



**Fig. 11 Herding cattle along the road that leads to the gentle folk of Addis Ababa. Photo, Elleni Zeleke. Just east of position 10 on map.**

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<sup>38</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst "The Changing Face of Addis Ababa" 138.

<sup>39</sup> Position 10 on map.



**Fig. 12 Continuing to herd cattle along the streets of Addis Ababa.** Text on the billboard reads: "Have you heard? Cloud Nine class is here. It feels as good as it sounds. Ethiopian Airlines". Photo, Elleni Zeleke.

Meskel Square's history is less charmed. Before 1958, Meskel Square was known as Ras Berru Meda (field), for this area was given to Ras Berru by Minilik at the turn of the century.<sup>40</sup> His mansion, later expropriated by the Socialist government, continues to sit on a hill that over looks the square. The mansion is presently home to the Addis Ababa Museum.

In 1959, Haile-Selassie's regime decided to hold a Meskel celebration in this wide-open space. Meskel is the biggest festival in Ethiopia. It follows approximately two weeks after New Years (September according to the Ethiopian calendar) and celebrates

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<sup>40</sup> See Shifferaw Bekele, "Masqal Square and The Symbolism of its Arches", Unpublished Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Ethiopian Art, Italy, 2000. Rita Pankhurst loaned the paper to me while she was co-editing the proceedings of the conference for an upcoming publication by Red Sea Press. Meskel Square is marked position 11 on map.

the finding of the true cross by Elleni, Constantine's mother. In 1974, after the fall of Haile Selassie's regime, Meskel Square was renamed Revolutionary Square. It was the site of all of the May Day rallies, Revolution Day celebrations, and the occasional mass shooting. It was also the site where, in 1977 the Derg officially declared a Red Terror on the forces of reaction. It is also where they declared "everything to the war front", collecting a militia of 300,000 volunteer soldiers to march on Revolutionary Square, and show their opposition to Said Barre and his imperialist supporters.

Before the fall of Haile-Selassie's regime, Meskel Square was a dirt field. It was not until the time of the Derg that the field was redesigned, asphalted and stadium like seats erected. As well, arches, to mark one's entry and exit into the square were put up. A permanent exhibition centre was also built, next to Ras Birru's mansion.<sup>41</sup> During the tenth anniversary of the revolution much attention was again paid to Revolutionary Square. A gigantic billboard of the Derg leader was erected, and new better executed portraits and scenes of socialist life were put up. As well, more arches were placed on the roads that lead south out of Meskel Square. These arches were designed with the help of the North Korean State and were painted in gay colours, often depicting some aspect of how life had improved since the revolution. The arches usually contained a typical socialist slogan, such as "Long Live Proletarian Solidarity" or "Workers of the World Unite".<sup>42</sup>

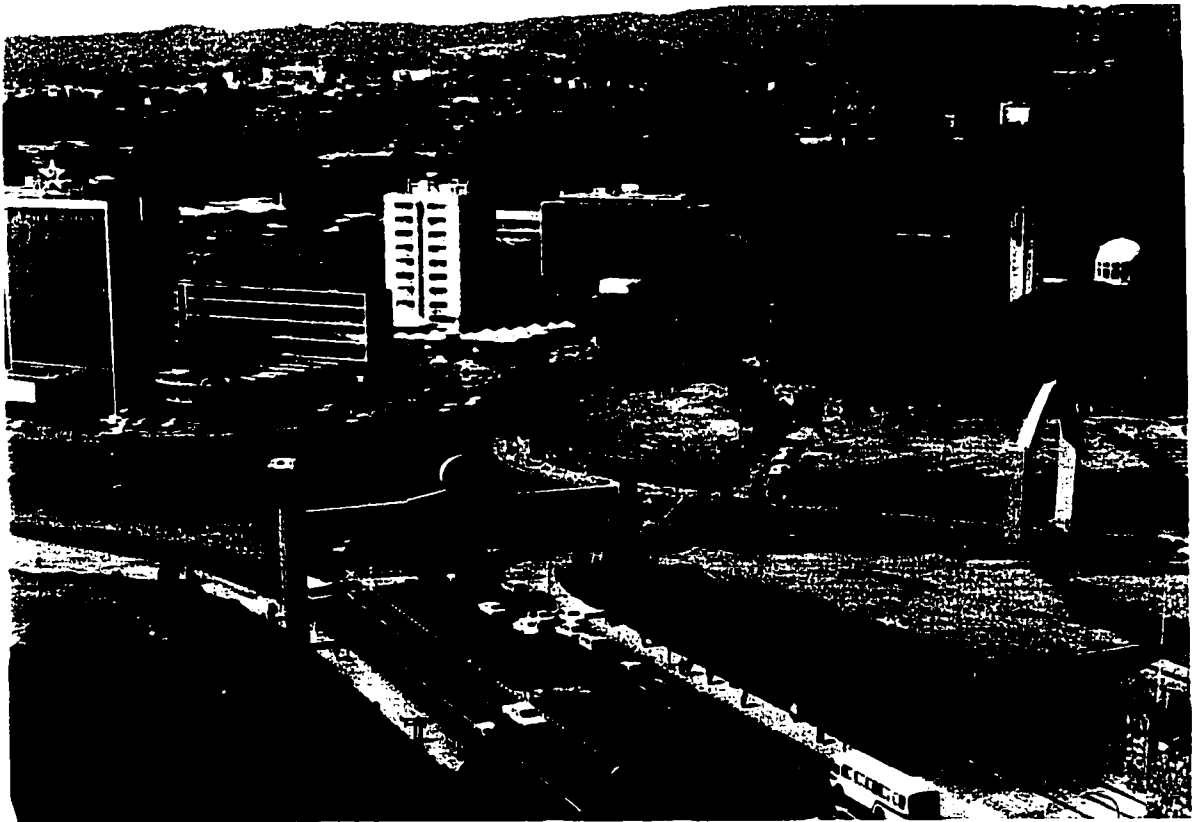
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while she was co-editing the proceedings of the conference for an upcoming publication by Red Sea Press. Meskel Square is marked position 11 on map.

<sup>41</sup> Most of the facts about Meskel Square have been gathered from Shifferaw Bekele's article. However, the more descriptive, colourful aspects of the facts have been added by me. I take responsibility for all adjectives in this paragraph. In addition, the story of mass shootings was gathered from reading Andargachew Tiruneh's *The Ethiopian Revolution* 211.

<sup>42</sup> These facts were obtained from discussions with artists who worked on the project of redesigning Meskel Square. In particular, my conversations with the sculptor, Tadessa Beleyne, have been most informative.

Today Revolution Square is often called Meskel Square. What name you use depends on where your sympathies lie. However, as the meeting point of six major avenues, Meskel Square, certainly lies in the purview of advertising companies. Learning well from their previous leaders, the new leaders of the free market economy have now replaced the Derg's billboards with ones produced to sell products, not ideologies. What astounds the keen observer, however, is that these new billboards are placed in exactly the same positions as the old billboards, towering over the passerby in the same monumental fashion.



**Fig. 13** Revolutionary arches erected on Bole Road, 1984. *Photo, Kebede Bogale. Position 12 on map.*

During the time of the Derg regime, Meskel Square generated a lot of humour for the Addis Ababa residents. While it may appear that the residents dutifully attended all

the May Day rallies and the Revolutionary anniversaries that were held in the square, later, at night, before the mid-night curfew set in, the square became the focus of many jokes. Ten years later, if the Addis Ababa resident is going to tell you anything at all about the Derg regime, it will be to repeat these jokes.

It is hard to repeat jokes. First we have the problem of translation and second we have a problem of you being unfamiliar with the context to which the jokes refer. Yes, the distance between you and I is large. But listen, I want to suggest that no matter how far we stand apart from each other, the shape of the space between you and I remains the same. Use that as your way to share in the jokes.

Joke one. The speaker at the rally asks, “who are the three enemies of the revolution”? Automatically, a man raising his right fist answers; “feudalism, bureaucratic capitalism, and...” Someone points to him. Flustered, he thinks fast, “Oh excuse me, excuse me”, he mutters and changes from raising his right fist to raising his left fist. Who are the three enemies of the revolution? It seems it is a question of which fist you raise.

Joke two. If you look closely at the formal details of the billboard-like portraits of Marx, Lenin and Engels that decorate Addis Ababa, you will notice they are three men but they share one ear.

And joke three. A play on words. Marx, Lenin and Engels are our new Selassie (trinity), their image demonstrates, haile selassie (power of the trinity).

Joke four. “Who are the three enemies of the revolution?” “Feudalism, beaucratric capitalism, and imperialism”. Who are the three enemies of the revolution? Those three bearded guys, (pointing to a portrait of Marx, Lenin and Engels).

The jokes are endless. I cannot remember them all. In any case, you probably get a sense of their sentiment.

But Revolutionary Square did not just generate humour, it generated community. I tell a friend that \$50 million was spent by the Derg on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. He laughs and tells me, “well at least 10 cents a day was spent on providing me with milk so that I could practice a routine that was to be performed in front of the party leaders on the day of the anniversary itself. My friend, who is not nostalgic for the Derg regime, certainly is nostalgic for the comraderie of the Mass Games, for the bus that took him to practice every day, for the friends he made while performing for the revolution. For him, Mass Games may have been about revolution, but it was also about laughing at jokes that poked fun at Ethiopia’s new trinity and drinking milk with people he may otherwise have never met. It is with some degree of affection, then, that my friend thinks of the bearded men with one ear.

It is a strange fact that although a number of arches designed by the North Koreans went up around town, the arches at Meskel Square have had staying power. Today, they remain in place surrounded by large ads from Coke, Pepsi and a number of beer companies. The arch’s socialist slogans have nearly disappeared and the gaily-painted scenes of factories and agricultural abundance appear as fudgy spots of colour on rusting iron. No one seems to know what to do with these arches. Should they come down? Should they be restored? If they are restored, should they tell a different story? As for myself, I worry that they are rotting and will eventually fall on an unsuspecting passer-by.

Recently I went to a government office in order to find photographs of Meskel Square. I wanted to visually demonstrate to you all the changes that have occurred on this piece of land. I knew that the photographs existed, for I had seen them in books published by the Derg regime. Through coffee table conversation, I also came to know that this particular office kept a large photo archive. The first time I went to the office, I was told that such an archive did not exist. The next time I planned to visit the office, I first called a friend with a high position in a government office and asked if it would be possible for him to introduce me to someone that had some degree of power in the office that I wanted access to. The introductions were made and I was told that the archive I had heard about, in fact existed. We called down to the man in charge of the actual archive, but he said that he would not release the photos as he was about to retire and was not interested in causing any trouble for himself whereby he may lose his job and his pension. A little confused, I asked why he would lose his job. It was explained to me that the Derg period was still a sensitive issue, and as the archivist did not know for what purpose I would be using the photos, he could not trust that I might not have a negative impact on him. It was therefore better for him to just say, “no” to me. After a great deal of letter writing on my behalf as well as an assessing of where my sympathies may lie, I was eventually granted access to the archives. But the archivist certainly did not grant me access to all the photos, and certainly, as I searched through what was made available to me, I felt that it would be better if I left the archives as soon as possible.

The bureaucrat’s attitude helps us understand why the arches at Meskel Square have an ambivalent status within the landscape of Addis Ababa. It is not that people do not know whether they should hate them or love them or be indifferent to them, rather

they need to collect a pay check and to risk saying anything in public is perceived as putting your self at risk of losing a pay check, amongst other things. It is best to not say anything at all. Instead, opinions are leaked through the rumours and the jokes made late at night in the *Tej Bete* (House of Mead).

Recently I also visited the Addis Ababa Master Plan office where I was told that a survey was conducted on whether the residents of Addis Ababa liked the arches at Meskel Square. I never actually saw the results of the survey and it is unclear to me whether the survey was really conducted or not. What I did see, however, was a document that outlined a plan to tear down the Derg erected arches in favour of erecting new arches at all the roads that lead out of Addis Ababa.

Present day Addis Ababa is encircled by Mount Entoto to the North and the East, Mount Mengesha to the West, the volcanic cones of Wechecha, Kepi and Furi to the South-west and opens to the great plains of Shoa and Arsi to the South.<sup>43</sup> Thus, no matter which direction one leaves Addis Ababa, a distinct geography marks the city off from the regions lying next to it. Located on an escarpment approximately 2500 to 2900 metres above sea level, the particular geography of Addis Ababa gives the city a circular shape. In addition, Addis Ababa itself lies in the geographical centre of Ethiopia. The new Addis Ababa Master Plan office has thus proposed to further encircle Addis Ababa with gated entrance ways. The plan is to erect arches at each exit to the city. On the side facing Addis Ababa, the arch would depict life in the region to which the road leads. On the side facing the region, the arch would depict life in Addis Ababa. Whatever the results of the

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<sup>43</sup> Tesheste Ahderom 26.

survey with regards the Derg arches, the idea of further aestheticizing Addis Ababa through arch building bodes well with the people at the Master Plan office.<sup>44</sup>

The entrance and exits to Addis Ababa have always been markers of the State's desires and its collusion with various social forces. There is nothing new behind the choice of places the Addis Ababa Master Plan office has picked to illustrate the ethnic diversity of Ethiopia. What will be new are the images. Presently, two of the busiest roads that lead out of Addis Ababa are Bole Road — it leads out from Meskel Square, onto the International Airport — and Debre Zeit (Bishoftu) Road. This latter road leads from Meskel Square to the Southern Regions of the country. During the Derg period, these two roads (but Bole Road in particular) were heavily decorated.<sup>45</sup> On Bole Road, one would find more general images of socialist life, while on the roads leading to the regions one could find billboards with slogans such as “Everything to the War Front”. Today, one cannot count the number of commercial billboards that adorn these streets, there are that many. *The Globe and Mail* has claimed that this erasure and reinscription is indicative of Ethiopia's promising future.<sup>46</sup> As I walk the streets of Addis Ababa I can only read a darker, although we can be sure, a more subtle narrative in all of this — as we mentioned already, one form of modernity is dumped, only to re-enter as a value added import.

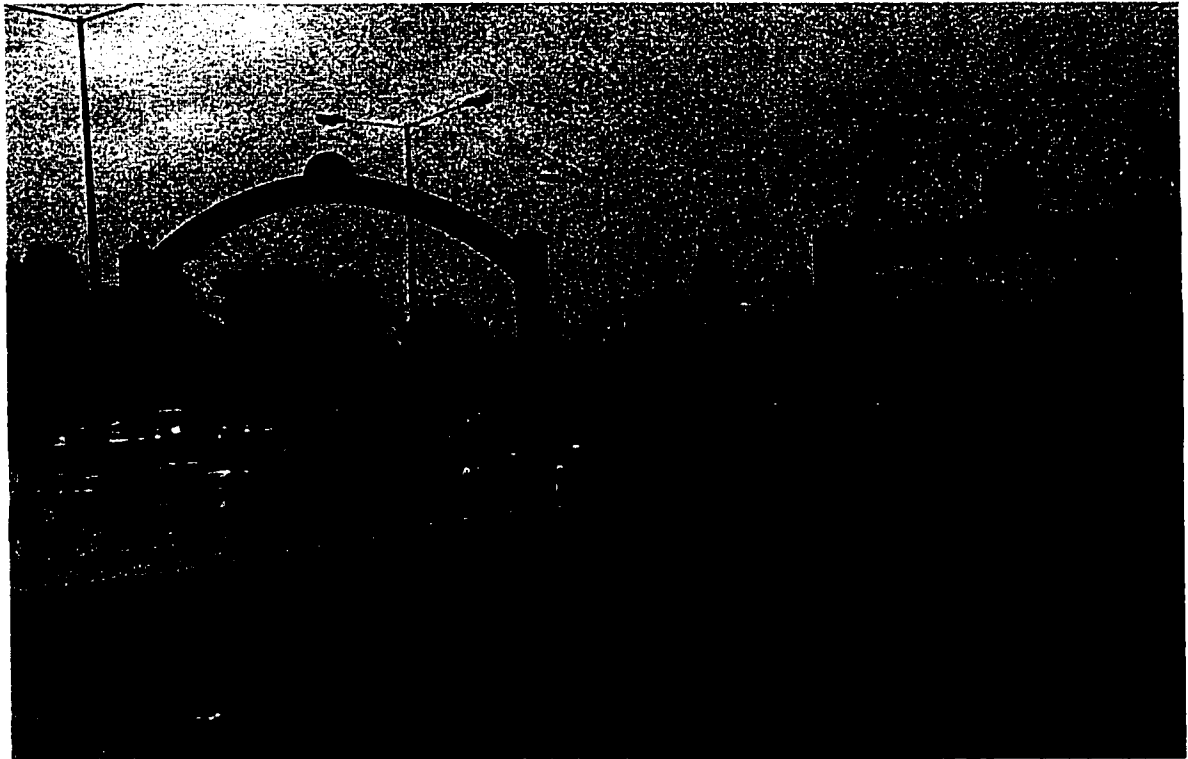
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<sup>44</sup> “Beautify Addis with Arches: Preliminary Discussion Paper” (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa Master Plan Office, Miazia 1993 (EC) / May 2001(GC)). Original document is in Amharic, free trans. Henock Tadella and Assefa Mengesha.

<sup>45</sup> Position 12 on map.

<sup>46</sup> Andrew England, “Ethiopia's Slow Steps Along a Democratic Path” *The Globe and Mail* Thursday, May 31, 2001, National Edition.: A 12. The article describes the fading Russian on the billboards near Bole Airport, replaced by signs in the modern European languages and then claims; “The changing signboards are a metaphor for a country of 60 million that is emerging from Marxist dictatorship, famine and war and hesitantly reaching for democracy and its place in a globalized world”.

Indeed, just forty minutes south of Addis Ababa on Debre Zeit Road one used to find the Derg built Heroes Village: a model, socialist community, particularly aimed at rehabilitating soldiers. One of the more remarkable features of the community was its museum. Here many billboard-like artist productions created for the Derg regime were hung or stored. In addition, many of the country's leading artists were commissioned (without pay) to create works for the museum's walls. After the fall of the Derg, the soldiers were sent home (perhaps to Sidist Kilo?) and without warning some of the walls were torn down, while others were painted over. Today, at the site where the Heroes Village once stood, a military engineering college now operates.



**Fig. 14 The faded arches of the Revolution, along Bole Road, 2001. Photo, Elleni Zeleke. Position 11 and 12 on map.**

### **Big Men, Rude Men, Eloquent Men.**

Minilik II Boulevard also extends out from Meskel Square, this time in a northeast direction. Created in 1955, this street was once known as Jubilee Highway. A gift of the Ethiopian people to Haile-Selassie, Jubilee Highway was created in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Haile-Selassie's ascension to the throne. Divided in two by gardens that contain pleasant pink and yellow flowered plants, this highway became home to Haile-Selassie's Jubilee Palace, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as Africa Hall, another gift from Haile-Selassie to encourage The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to have their head-quarters in Addis Ababa. Indeed, Jubilee Road was built at a time when a number of African countries had recently won their independence from Europe. Forever looking outward, Haile-Selassie understood the importance Ethiopia played in the imagination of Pan-Africanist as the only African country to have resisted colonization. Jubilee Highway was therefore built in anticipation of making Addis Ababa the diplomatic centre of a new Africa.<sup>47</sup> The Derg, unaware of how closely their modernizing tendencies resembled Haile-Selassie's utopian efforts, if not his successes, later placed their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary Lenin monument in the foliage directly across the gated entrance to the Economic Commission for Africa.<sup>48</sup>

Lenin is a *Tillek Sew*. What is a *Tillek Sew*? Literally this phrase means "big man". Members of the Ethiopian nobility were often called *Tillek Sew*, as were members of the Derg regime. *Tillek Sew* is distinct from *Chewa Sew* (a respectable man, active in arbitrating community affairs). Ethiopians, have a complicated relationship to the big

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<sup>47</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, "The Changing Face of Addis Ababa" 138. Also see, Tesheste Ahderom's essay, already mentioned above.

man. While a Tillek Sew is in power, those being dominated will sing his or her praises, compliment their diction, speak highly of their elegance, beg favour from them, etc. But as soon as the Tillek Sew falls from power, the same praises will, in a most speedy manner be transferred on to the next Tillek Sew. Yet, respect for Tillek Sew as a profession seems to be unwavering, as an institution, it is never questioned. What is questioned is the one who occupies the position. It is generally believed that the position of Tillek Sew is necessary to the proper functioning of society. Yet, as oration is probably the most highly regarded talent in Ethiopia, the practice of insulting the Tillek Sew without him realizing that he is being insulted is also a common and highly regarded talent. What this suggests is a certain attitude to power. If you have power, you will be respected, but power is always seen as impermanent. What we can say is that power in its societal function is respected, though not individuals who possess it.

Recently a young university student attempting to win favour and affection from a classmate took his new object of adoration for a walk. They strolled through Meskel Square and slowly ambled their way up Minilik II Boulevard. They passed the Jubilee Palace and made their way towards Africa Hall, all the while enjoying the cool breezes that passes through the only regularly manicured public garden area in Addis Ababa. Eventually, they reached the area where the Lenin Monument once stood. And with a sense of triumph, they sat and experienced their first kiss.

As the young suitor recounted his story to me, it became apparent that walking along Jubilee Road was a specific tactic of romance. Moreover, sitting where Lenin once stood was a way of making oneself a Tillek Sew. It is, as if by sitting with a Tillek Sew, (any Tillek Sew would have done the job) a certain power would be granted to the young

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<sup>48</sup> Position 13.

man and his budding romance. But what is more interesting about this story is the way it helps unravel an even more bewildering recounting of an experience with Marx, Lenin and Engels.

There I was, another night, another bar, this one a bit more rawdy, a bit more rough. I was with some friends and we started joking with a waitress, who claimed to be called Imabete (which translates to mean Lady).<sup>49</sup> Imabete had also grown up in Addis Ababa during the time of the Derg regime. Somehow, during the change of regimes, her circumstances also changed and she was forced to drop out of high school. Sooner, rather than later, Imabete took up employment in the service industry. Imabete was extremely nostalgic for the time of the Derg. She claimed that in this period, if the man who headed a household worked, he could support his family. Now a decent office job can barely support one person, much less a family. She also claimed that during the Derg there was no AIDS, no prostitution and there was guaranteed access to food. This last fact is true, as each Kebele (neighbourhood) office organized subsidized rations for its members, rich or poor. As for prostitution, perhaps it is just that now it is much more visible as the mid-night curfew has been lifted. Now, the market determines everything.

Imabete was a series of delightful contradictions. Describing, the *meAt* (infinite number) of posters and billboards that covered Addis Ababa during the time of the Derg, Imabete said that as a school child they made her very happy. Why did the billboards make her happy? “Because”, she said incredulously, “seeing Tillek Sew makes one happy”. Pressed further, she compared seeing the images of socialist patrimony to seeing a poster of a beautiful movie star, say from the film *The Titanic*. It just makes you happy.

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<sup>49</sup> It is most likely that Imabete was doubling as both waitress and prostitute.

Imabete, then continued to explain that during the Derg seeing so many Tillek Sew exalted her because it showed how many people were working for the country. Now, she said, there are very few Tillek Sew, and look around, no one cares for us, we are poor, there is AIDS, I work in a bar, etc. Yet, one may ask, does having a Tillek Sew in the form of a movie star imply that someone is working for Ethiopia? For Imabete, this was implicit in the position of Tillek Sew; power comes with dependents, with responsibility.

This of course is far from the case for the modern Tillek Sew — after all, they are just doing it! Despite Imabete's insights, what the aesthetization of Tillek Sew therefore suggests, is an effort to fix individuals in positions of power, over and above Tillek Sew as an institution whose operational mode attempts to guarantee the individuals down fall from power.

Imabete tells me that she would be pleased if there were more Tillek Sew pictured on the streets of Addis Ababa. Mono 2000's present monopoly on billboards does not satisfy her. But, would a further aestheticization of Tillek Sew really solve Imabete's problems? How long could she sustain her new found pleasures? In the end, if the Tillek Sew is monumentalized, there will be less responsibility, more "just doing it", less food from the Kebele office and more people sleeping in Sidist Kilo. Imabete, clearly worried that she was going to die of AIDS, will most likely end up doing just that.

### **Liminal Spaces, In-between Spaces, Tirelessly Tired Spaces**

Addis Ababa is a tiresomely monumental city. Just before we get to the end of Jubilee Highway we pass the paragon of cold war architecture, the 1960's Addis Ababa

Hilton Hotel<sup>50</sup> and then land right back at Minilik II's Palace.<sup>51</sup> Here, we also come to the tail end of Development Through Cooperation Avenue. Addis Ababa, a city of palaces and modernist utopian gestures. But are these gestures really that utopian? After all, every contemporary city has a Hilton Hotel, lit billboards and a collection of ill-fitting Mercedes Benz.

It is the places in-between the wide boulevards, the places that stretch out from behind the glamour of Bole Road, the places erased when homes were removed so as to make room for the new, marble hall ways of the Economic Commission for Africa, that must inform one's reading of the Addis Ababa Hilton Hotel, or one's reading of the various billboards that come up and down in the city, and the reading of the gas station, especially designated for the foreign-aid workers on the ECA compound. This reading cannot be about guilt or about frivolous spending or economic imperatives. It is much more and much less than that. Rather, the reading must start by acknowledging a connection in the work the ECA does, the work Marx does and the work Imabete (waitress and prostitute) pursues. Everyone is trying to raise the Addis Ababa resident up just a little more. The strategy for doing this is where the difference lies. In the transformative gestures of the grand boulevards, the Marx billboards and the Shell covered Lenin lies a narrative of new beginnings, where everything can and will be good. A story of power — for whom else can command enough resources to start again from scratch — and a story of how power is to be manipulated.

This is a double narrative of erasure and reinscription. But, and this is important, we are not just talking about erasing old images that are then replaced with new ones.

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<sup>50</sup> Position 14 on map.

<sup>51</sup> Position 15 on map.

Something else is seeping out of the space between the act of erasure and the act of reinscription. Lives are lost; people are getting poorer, memory stumbles and falls. What we are talking about is dismal, ever-pressing poverty lying in-between the grand boulevards, behind the billboards of whatever, stacked up on Sidist Kilo. This is what is seeping out of the space, between the double narrative of erasure and reinscription; real lives, broken. Average age of death: forty-four. If then, I call the modernist gestures in Addis Ababa utopian, it is because they stand in sharp contrast to all that surrounds them. Moreover, in the struggle to make do, the tactics that make space a habitable place are constantly erased in the name of the new beginning. What seeps out of the erasure implicit in new beginnings is people making do with less habitable places not more.

In 1959, the then Mayor of Addis Ababa, Dejazmatch Zawdie Gebre Sellassie, delivered an address at the Ethiopian National Library entitled “Problems and Plans of Addis Ababa”. In the address, he assured his August audience that a “Municipality could not destroy a whole town as being a slum”.<sup>52</sup> In a somewhat similar vein, in 1986, at the conference convened for the centenary celebration of the founding of Addis Ababa, Dejene Habtemariam delivered a paper on “Architecture in Addis Ababa”. In this paper, Dejene claims that “Addis Ababa has very few buildings that do not possess sculpturally treated facades”.<sup>53</sup> But, I wondered, reading Dejene’s most informative article, none of the structures located on the narrow roads on either side of Sidist Kilo contain sculptural facades. These simple structures, usually made out of mud, are where a large percentage of the residents of Addis Ababa live. And we can be sure, the architects of these buildings

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<sup>52</sup> Dejazmatch Zawdie Gabrre Selassie [sic]. “Problems and Plans of Addis Ababa”, *Ethiopian Observer*, Vol III, nos 2, March 1959: 38.

<sup>53</sup> Dejene HabteMariam 210.

rarely think of sculptural facades except as something belonging to Tillek Sew. If these structures of the poor do not figure into Dejene's account of Addis Ababa, perhaps it is because the places lying in the in-between spaces of the city do not really count as buildings. Dejene, cleverly solved Zewde's dilemma of whether or not, destroy the city that is a slum; just ignore the slum.

In a review of the basic principles of the Derg regime's Master Plan of Addis Ababa, Techeste Ahderom tells us that the regime's new Master Plan will convey a strong symbolic image; "the image of a modern socialist country which also has deep roots in the past. The image of a city, the features of which are strongly determined by the natural environment and vegetation. The image of a city, which taking advantage of present social and economic patterns of growth, wants to become better balanced, more equitable and more pleasant to live in."<sup>54</sup> Yet, before telling us all of this, we are reminded that; "investments and expenditures that would be unjustified vis-a-vis the income level of its population and present difficult conditions of the economy of the country become necessary when the ambivalence of [Addis Ababa's] functions are taken into consideration".<sup>55</sup> Addis Ababa is both an international diplomatic centre and a local city. Given this ambivalent status it must forge ahead in becoming more modern, (its status after all is not so ambivalent). And the locals who live alongside this diplomacy, what do they do? They must see their making do, their tactics, erased in the wake of all this image-making. They too start again. Not from scratch, but from the materials left behind by Tillek Sew.

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<sup>54</sup> Techeste Ahderom 23.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid* 23.

The present Addis Ababa administration, large and impenetrable as it may be, has managed to put their current Master Plan into action. As a result a series of new ring roads connecting the outskirts of the city to each other are under construction. A stretch of the highway running off from the posh old-airport neighbourhood has recently been completed. Driving on this highway that runs through less affluent neighbourhoods, one truly feels elsewhere. The road is so smooth. The majority of users of the highway, I am sure, must also feel this way.

The new ring roads are fenced off on either side. Other than the designated exits one cannot enter or leave the strips of smoothness. Thus the neighbour who once ran to the *souk* (local vendor) across the street to purchase a little sugar, now is supposed to walk for quite some way to reach an exit or an overpass in order to access this same neighbour. But the residents living along the highway will have none of this. Throughout the day one therefore sees old and young, women and men jumping over the fence. And then of course, there are all the animals being herded from the countryside into the city. The shepherd, understanding that he has the same right to the road as the Mercedes Benz, makes no haste. It is impossible for a car to speed on this highway.

All this is a truly hilarious sight. But for some it is also an irritation. As a result there have been rumblings amongst the gentle folk of Addis Ababa, who, pleased with the beauty of the new highway, now wish to train the rest of the Addis Ababa residents on how to use a modern highway.

In the weekly English language newspapers, *Fortune* and *The Reporter*, there has been a recent spate of articles decrying the condition of Ethiopia's capital city. We are told astonishing things, like the fact, that once Addis Ababa's streets were clean and

much less crowded, where as now, all one can smell is garbage. The streets of Addis Ababa are overcrowded; the migration from the rural areas is uncontrolled. The numbers of the homeless are swelling. Unlike Dejene's maneuverings, the stink cannot be ignored.

One response to this is a project initiated by Gashe Aberra Mula and sponsored by a number of international NGO's. Aberra Mula is a well-known classical Ethiopian musician who lived in exile during the Derg regime. Returning to Addis Ababa, he was shocked and dismayed by the city's poverty. He remembered the shiny new highways built by Haile-Selassie, the skyscrapers built in the 1960's, the aroma of espresso as one drove into Piazza. Aberra Mula wanted to make a change. He wanted the old pride of Addis Ababa to shine once more. Using his celebrity status, Aberra Mula thus encouraged street children to create paintings of various aspects of Ethiopian life, past and present. The paintings were then placed at strategic points around Addis Ababa. He also encouraged the street kids to create gardens in central squares in Addis Ababa and to fence these gardens so as to create a feeling of orderliness in the city. The project took the city by storm, managing to inspire a number of otherwise lethargic residents to take up the call to clean up the city. It is this project, in fact that popularized the phrase, "We can do it"! An uncanny twist to all of this is the smarts of Mono 2000. Next to some of the more prominent areas decorated by Aberra Mula's crew, a number of gigantic billboards have gone up. The whole thing, I must confess, does give one a feeling of civic pride. But, I also remember many being filled with awe when they stared at the billboards of Marx, Lenin and Engels. This city, they used to say, is no regular Third-World Capital. It is so Modern.

Ambivalence, then, tempers all interpretation.

In any case, most of the people I talked with barely noticed the billboards erected by Mono 2000. Unlike the billboards erected by the Derg, little humour or commentary is generated by this new act of reinscription.

On the other hand, two years after Aberra Mula's storm took over Addis Ababa, other than maintaining the main squares, the volunteer labour initially involved in the project has lost interest; the fences are coming down and the paintings are being erased. Apparently "Just doing it" is proving to be a little more complicated than initially thought.

Spread over 218 square kilometers, the places located behind and in-between the modernist gestures of Addis Ababa are becoming more prominent than all the modernist gestures put together. In this way, we can say place is winning over space. But, some may reply, so what?

### **The Trick**

Listen, I am a ruse, a trick, an elision that has slipped out of opportunity and circumstance. I know: you who are founded on the Subject will have a hard time understanding this. But beyond the European demand to always remember and the American compulsion to forget, another story seeps out. That something is what I am. Between the act of reinscription and the act of erasure is the groove left behind by the passer-by, trivial and banal, forgotten as quickly as the pace of the walker; it "produces in a place that does not belong to it".<sup>56</sup> This is what I am. Unlike history I can never take

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<sup>56</sup> De Certeau 87. By reintroducing de Certeau at this point, I am deliberately attempting to circle the reader back to Chapter One and the notion of "tactics", offered there. In just a moment, I will quote Foucault in the manner I quoted him in our section called, **Living Amongst the Billboards**, in Chapter Two. The narrative ploy, here, is to traffic the reader back into thinking about memory; we want to ask what is

sides. “I don’t have solid knowledge of anything.”<sup>57</sup> Unlike you who has the “singularity of a competence”,<sup>58</sup> I am “anyone or no one, in the common history”.<sup>59</sup>

“The anonymous hero is very ancient. He is the murmuring voice of societies. In all ages he comes before texts”.<sup>60</sup> Foucault says “we can easily imagine a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author...would unfold in the anonymity of a murmur.”<sup>61</sup> And Agamben teaches us, following Foucault, that all speech, is first and foremost authored by the murmur of the world. The groove on the pavement is an inflection of the murmur of the world. I come in various inflections; it depends on the kind of pavement, on the nature of “the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers”.<sup>62</sup> Why do I matter? Because I am “the point in which something possible passes into existence, giving itself through a relation to an impossibility.”<sup>63</sup> I make the world your world, since possibility exists.

You, who are founded on the subject like to tell a different story. You have triumphed over the groove of the passer-by, triumphed over the depths of time. “Through the foundation of an autonomous space”<sup>64</sup> you grant your self a space beyond the murmur of the world, beyond all that is around you, beyond the anonymous hero. You “prepare

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memory, but more importantly what is the work memory is doing on the streets of Addis Ababa. Moreover, we are trying to link memory and tactics.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid* 5.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid* 5.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid* 5.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid* V.

<sup>61</sup> Foucault, *Essential Works* 222. The reader will recall that we quoted these lines in Chapter Two.

<sup>62</sup> De Certeau 37.

<sup>63</sup> Agamben 147. Again, the reader will recall that we quoted this line in Chapter Two. There, we argued that subjectivity and as such, agency are not founded on the subject but are founded through a relation of impossibility to possibility, given in language. Here, we are privileging memory as having a particular kind of relationship with impossibility and possibility. But, it is hoped that the reader understands that we have been arguing for this privileging all along. In any case, we will take this point up again in Chapter Four.

<sup>64</sup> De Certeau 36.

future expansions”.<sup>65</sup> The stink of Addis Ababa, on the other hand, forces you to take pause.

Since the early 1990’s, officials from the former Derg regime have been on trial, charged with various crimes, the most common being genocide. It might surprise you, how, little gossip, conversation, or rumour these trials have generated. If there is commentary it seems it is to dismiss them as “only politics”.<sup>66</sup>

A recently returned exile commented that if Mengistu Haile-Mariam, the leader of the brutal Derg regime, were to return to Addis Ababa, he doubts many would bat an eye. He was surprised. What I know is that Tillek Sew is Tillek Sew is Tillek Sew. “Who, still on a battlefield, wants a monument?”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> De Certeau 36.

<sup>66</sup> Of the few rumours and jokes related to the Derg’s brutality that I came across during my stay in Addis Ababa from February to April 2002, there is one that is worth repeating here. Apparently, the Gondare people are now fond of saying, “thanks to Melaku”. Melaku was the governor of Gondar during the time of the Derg and was notoriously brutal. It is said that he would walk into bars, get drunk and randomly assault and kill people. As a result of his brutality, a large number of people left Gondar as refugees and eventually ended up in the West. Thus, it is claimed that more than any other region in Ethiopia, Gondar has a large diasporic population. The Gondare’s that have remained in Ethiopia, therefore now say “thanks to Melaku, we are better off than many” as their region now receives large remittances of US dollars from relatives abroad.

<sup>67</sup> John Berger, *And Our faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Vintage International, 1991) 21.



**Fig. 15 Fading canvas mural on a wall in downtown Gondar, 1997.** The painting shows a mother (woman) resurrecting a murdered child (brother, friend?) from the ground. She is showing the skeleton to a Tillek Sew. It is unclear to me which regime the Tillek Sew is supposed to represent. However, above the painting is written (in rough translation): "Compensate me for the blood of my child that you have spilt in vain". It is most likely that the painting was erected by the present regime when they were still a rebel group (or in the period of transition) and had taken Gondar from the Derg regime. One may also notice the numerous commercial signs on either side of the painting. Photo. Elleni Zeleke.

## Chapter Four

### Tizita<sup>1</sup>: Still Living Amongst the Billboards

“Memories of modernity”, Beatriz Jaguibre tells us, “posit a discreet paradox”.<sup>2</sup>

Modernity, after all is about being new, being of the present moment. Remembering, on the other hand, infers the old. What, then, can it mean to remember the new?

Walter Benjamin, of course, understood quite well what it meant to remember the new. It meant that what you were involved in was the construction of dialectical images; capable of critiquing the very notion of progress proposed in modernity. Thus, speaking of his study of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin told his colleagues, “I have nothing to say, only to show”.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin’s colleagues, responded with doubt. Some, like Adorno, even went so far as to claim that *The Arcades Project* was “on the crossroads between magic and positivism”,<sup>4</sup> unable to critique anything at all. Yet, if it is true that Benjamin’s intention was to use “all the scholarly imagination at his disposal to discover (within the historical evidence) counter-images that rubbed against the semantics of progress”,<sup>5</sup> as we move towards concluding this thesis it must seem even more apparent that the notion of dialectical images is very much suitable for helping us get at a way to proceed in addressing Ethiopia’s hardships.

As we have already discussed the dialectical image as Benjamin proposed it happens at a particular moment of contemplation. It is the moment when the fore-history

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<sup>1</sup> Tizita is a style of Ethiopian music that deals specifically with issues of memory and remembrance. As a word it can also be translated to mean simply: remembrance. As a medium it is a place for memory to be lodged.

<sup>2</sup> Beatriz Jaguibre, “Modernist Ruins: National Narratives and Architectural Forms”, *Alternative Modernities* 333.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin in Buck-Morss 222.

<sup>4</sup> Adorno in Buck-Morss 228.

<sup>5</sup> Buck-Morss 92.

of an object is confronted with its decay and cultural transmission, that is, with its after-history. Blasted out of the continuum of history an object is no longer emblematic of a historical collectivity, nor is it simply empirically given<sup>6</sup>. Rather, it “translates into ruin the fragility of former utopian projects”.<sup>7</sup>

The world was full of modernist ruins for Benjamin, as it is for us in our study of Addis Ababa. For us, remembering the billboards of the Derg immediately puts into tension two differing temporalities. One temporality is the former newness of the Derg, its olden modernity, its former possibility. The second temporality is the newly new or the newly modern of the present regime. The tension of the two temporalities immediately creates a dialectical image whereby the fore-history of the Derg billboards — the narrative of a nation on a path to modernity — is confronted by a new narrative of onwards and upwards, a new utopian moment. Here, the after-history of the Derg billboards is indeed the story of decay, ambivalence is their only status. The triumphant national ethos of the Derg is thus fractured and shown to be a ruin. However, and perhaps more importantly, what the dialectical image also reveals to us is that, “the objects of modernity, while positing themselves as the new, inevitably bear their own demise, yet deny their aging process.”<sup>8</sup> The dialectical image, then, produces a critique of the notion of progress and development inherent in the story of modernity, simply through showing up what modernity denies of itself. It cannot be long before we understand the consequence of this denial. Left in the wake of modernity’s denial are the in-between spaces of Addis Ababa; average age of death: forty-four.

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<sup>6</sup> See Buck-Morss’ description of the dialectical image in the Chapter, “Is this Philosophy” in *The Dialectics of Seeing*.

<sup>7</sup> Beatriz Jaguibre 346.

<sup>8</sup> Beatriz Jaguibre 331.

The in-between spaces of Addis Ababa are also the stuff that make up an after-history of a modernist object. The tactics of the passer-by are one side of a dialectical image. They show up the fore-history of modernist objects as ruin, simply by imploding the intentions of the utopian moment. The people transform the Derg's water-fountain into a lavatory; the utopian intention of the modern is blasted out of history. Remembering this act, together with the fore-history of the lavatory (water-fountain), produces a critique of modernity. We have indeed shown this. We may have little else to say.

But there is more. A third temporality is at work in the dialectical image, it is the time of the ancient hero, the murmur of the world that comes before texts. Taken, together with the fore-history and the after-history of a modern object, this third temporality puts into high tension the life of a modern object; and in the end offers an even more prescient critique of the narrative of progress, that is modernity. But what can this third temporality be?

It has been said by Susan Buck-Morss that Benjamin did not want the *Arcades Project* to be a story of life as it has been lived, nor even a story of life as it has been remembered, but a story of "life as it has been forgotten".<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this reconstruction was not to be arbitrary story telling but objective political education. But, as we have seen, constructing dialectical images is difficult. Have we escaped arbitrary story telling? Can we say that our double narratives are any more or less truthful than any other story telling? If, we are to believe Buck-Morss and understand that Benjamin wanted the dialectical image to show an objective truth, we must extend our understanding of the dialectical image. In so doing we will also further our appreciation of what the dialectical

image can do for us in our attempt to build a procedure to address Ethiopia's hardships.

Buck-Morss for her part does suggest that a story of life as it has been forgotten would invoke a third temporality in the dialectical image and she mobilizes everything from the Kabbalah, to the surrealists, to equating revolutionary time with messianic time in order to elaborate on this third temporality. But her explanation is confused or else we are bad readers, in any case it does not take us very far. For our part, we will rely on an intuition that we have been following throughout the course of this thesis. Let us then return to the city of our interest. There, we have seen that the groove left behind by the passer-by is forgotten as quickly as the pace of the walker and yet it produces in a place that does not belong to it. We have also seen that the groove of the passer-by is their tactics. Without much thought, the groove rubs against the spaces offered by official narratives, producing in a place that does not belong to it (recall the water fountain that becomes a lavatory). The groove produces from a place of ancient memory. It does not need to be remembered because it is always there. In fact, the more it is made visible, monumentalized and aestheticized, the more it disappears, the less it produces. But what can this mean other than the glorifying of tradition, a celebration of the old and the oppressive? We will follow an intuition.

Returning to the city of our interest, we will recall our guide's shame; we will also recall our guide's attempts to run away from itself when attending art shows, political demonstrations and the like, and yet our guide was continually confronted with an inability to escape itself. Moreover, we will recall that Agamben describes this shame as

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<sup>9</sup> Buck-Morss 39.

a double movement, a process of subjectification and desubjectification, self loss and self possession.<sup>10</sup>

But what else does Agamben have to say about this shame? It would seem that for him, testimony is also located in the lacuna created by the double movement of self-loss and self-possession:

Testimony's authority depends not on a factual truth, a conformity between something said and a fact or between memory and what happened, but rather on the immemorial relation between the unsayable and the sayable, between the outside and the inside of language.<sup>11</sup>

The argument Agamben is putting forward with regards both testimony and shame is very much dependent on the theory of enunciation elaborated by the French linguist, Emile Benveniste. Explaining this theory, Agamben tells us that every language has at its disposal a series of signs or shifters (I, you, him, her) that allow the individual to appropriate it, in order to use it. Unlike the colour red, or the thing called cat, shifters have no lexical meaning. Rather, I, you, him, her merely signify, "the person, who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing 'I' [you, him, her]".<sup>12</sup> What this implies is that, in order to start to speak one must abandon the living individual, where upon the 'I' must identify wholly with discourse. Speaking, then, is a paradoxical act that implies both subjectification and desubjectification — the living individual is subjected to discourse in order to speak, but at the same they are desubjectivized, for in adopting discourse they lose themselves:

In the absolute present of the event of discourse, subjectification and desubjectification coincide at every point and both the flesh and blood individual and the subject of enunciation are perfectly silent [...].<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* 107.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid* 158.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* 115.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* 117.

Speaking, or better, the speaking subject is a kind of shame. But what this also means is that speaking always bears witness to an impossibility of speech. Indeed, what gives speech its possibility, is the very impossibility of the living individual to speak; the speaking subject is authorized by the silence of the flesh and blood individual. Moreover, the speaking subject is what we often take to be subjectivity. But this subjectivity is really a kind of testimony.

For Agamben something specific happens in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when one tries to account for our relation to the contingency which authorizes our subjectivity. If old time sovereign power demonstrated its efficacy through the right to kill and letting live, contemporary power functions through its monopoly on violence and through taking up the care of the self as the business of State. Twentieth century power demonstrates its efficacy through the production “[...] in a human body, the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, zoe and bios, the inhuman and the human — survival”,<sup>14</sup> where as “testimony refutes precisely this isolation of survival from life”.<sup>15</sup> For Agamben, the ultimate expression of the attempted separation of life (the inhuman) from discourse (the human) is the production of the Muselmanner in the concentration camps of the Nazis.

In attempting to describe what the Muselmanner is in the contexts of the camps, Agamben turns to Primo Levi’s writings. For the purpose of the work we are doing in this thesis it will do us well to follow his example:

On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German, to

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid* 156.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* 157.

disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them from selections or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number endless; they the *Muselmanner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.<sup>16</sup>

Here what is being described is the production en masse of living individuals, breathing, but unable to speak, pure life without subjectivity. Here, what we have is the attempt to separate testimony from life.

Much of what Agamben teaches us with regards subjectivity and speech we have already learnt from post-structuralism in both its Derridean and Foucaultian inflections. However, in locating testimony in the lacuna between speech and language, Agamben is attempting to refuse the epistemological gesture of much of post-structuralism, when in the “just concern to do away with the false question ‘of who is speaking?’”<sup>17</sup> it continues the biopolitics of the twentieth century and forever separates the living individual from language.<sup>18</sup> Rather, as Agamben insists, the correct question must be what happens to the living individual under the various conditions in which the contingency of subjectivity gives itself. Here the concern is not with how the “I am” is positioned in discourse, but with a before of all that: which is the contingency that allows an “I am” (a shifter, but also the place of testimony) to come to life in the first place. This is why this contingency is before language, history and forgetting, before all texts, but in fact author(ize)s them.

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<sup>16</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996) 90.

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* 142.

<sup>18</sup> Agamben is certainly not as condemning of post-structuralism as I am here. Indeed, much of Agamben’s work is indebted to the theoretical maneuvers of Foucault. For my part, when I wrote the line above I was not so much thinking of Foucault or Derrida but Post-structuralism as it has been taken up in North-America. I have in mind, in particular the work of Judith Butler and the feminist scholarship that is associated with her. See, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Interestingly, Agamben locates the foundation of Derrida's infinite deferral of signification in the same place where he locates his own notion of testimony. Thus Agamben writes; "in the non-place of the Voice stands not writing, but the witness"<sup>19</sup>. It cannot be the job of this thesis to argue out the differences between Derrida and Agamben. However, in pointing out the similarity between his own thinking and that of Derrida, Agamben directs us towards another parallel that links their writing.

It would seem that both Derrida and Agamben take up Walter Benjamin's writings on messianic time in order to demonstrate the work of the aporia situated between language and speech. Derrida locates the work of deconstruction in this aporia.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, he claims that it is in an experience of this aporia that a possibility of justice erupts. As we have already seen, Agamben locates testimony and an "ethics immanent" in this aporia. But, more importantly both of these thinkers through their reading of Benjamin, equate this gap between language and speech with Benjamin's Jewish God — the God of Justice and more specifically with messianic time.<sup>21</sup>

Without getting very religious (for we are not students of religion) how can Agamben make his readings of theology mean something to us, living as we do in a world of increased religious fundamentalism? Steering us away from the epistemological trip-ups of much of post-structuralism (there is no endless deferral of meaning here), as well as historical processes that attempt to offer us a telos and a realized identity, Agamben says:

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid* 130.

<sup>20</sup> See, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority", *Deconstruction and The Possibility of Justice*, eds. Derrida Cornell, et al (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> See, Giorgio Agamben, "Walter Benjamin and The Demonic: Happiness and Historical Redemption" as well as the essay "The Messiah and The Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin" both in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[...]They [identities] have not an end but a remnant. There is no foundation in or beneath them; rather, at their center lies an irreducible disjunction in which each term, stepping forth in the place of a remnant, can bear witness. What is truly historical is not what redeems time in the direction of the future or even the past; it is rather, what fulfills time in the excess of a medium. The messianic Kingdom is neither the future (the millennium) nor the past (the golden age): it is instead a remaining time.<sup>22</sup>

And later:

In the concept of the remnant, the aporia of testimony coincides with the aporia of messianism. Just as the remnant of Israel signifies neither the whole people nor a part of the people but, rather the non-coincidence of the whole and the part, and just as messianic time is neither historical time nor eternity but, rather, the disjunction that divides them, so [...] the witnesses are neither the dead nor the survivors [...]. They are what remains between them.<sup>23</sup>

To come back to the dialectical image now; if it is indeed true that such images are working with notions from the Kabbalah, what we intuit from our reading of Agamben is that this cannot be as a result of a correspondence between messianic time and modernist revolutionary time, as Buck-Morss would lead us to believe. Rather what we intuit from our reading of Agamben is that Buck-Morss' offers us a simplistic reading of Benjamin's insistence that theology be the key to reading dialectical images. In her enthusiasm to link Benjamin's theology to a politically progressive position she claims far too quickly that there "is no secret that the Jewish Messianic conception, which already has attributes of being historical, materialist and collective translates into political radicalism in general and Marxism in particular".<sup>24</sup> Of course Buck-Morss is not a naïve reader and her claim is less about the arrival of the messiah than about the epistemological offerings of theology. Thus, Buck-Morss rightly points out, following

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<sup>22</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* 159.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid* 163,164.

<sup>24</sup> Buck-Morss 231.

her understanding of how the Kabbalah operates in Benjamin's thinking, that what the dialectical image allows to come forth is the aporia between the part and the whole. And while we will agree with this, what we have learnt from Agamben is that what remains is not revolution in Buck-Morss' sense of the term — that is a modernist type of utopian possibility — but instead a remaining time. What remains is an "ethics immanent": the Names of God, a call, tax, obligation, a relation to impossibility: *telsam*. *Telsam*? This is the objectivity that the dialectical image calls forth.

But all this puts forward the more pressing question of what happens in the living individual when it, like the residents of Addis Ababa must live continuously in shame, that is; at the point between subjectification and desubjectification? If "a fragment of memory is always forgotten in the act of saying 'I'",<sup>25</sup> our question is what happens to the living individual who is never allowed to forget, so that they may say "I"? As we have seen already with Agamben, the most extreme situation of this living in shame is the Muselmanner — pure survival without subjectivity. But Agamben's analyses is based on an understanding that in our contemporary world language is seen as instrumental, pure communication. Such a view *quiets* an experience of the impossible that the disjuncture between part and whole calls forth, it *quiets* an ethical call immanent to speaking (writing, thinking).

In a similar vein as Agamben, Derrida's essay that attempts a reading of Benjamin's conception of messianic time claims that:

Justice is an experience of the impossible. A will, a desire for justice whose structure wouldn't be an experience of aporia [that is a non road, and therefore an impossibility] would have no claim to be what it is, namely, a call for justice...Law (droit) is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable,

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<sup>25</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* 144.

it requires us to calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule.<sup>26</sup>

An experience of shame, then, is necessary for justice. Prolonged experiences of shame, however, prevent one from calculating with the incalculable. So, what happens to the living individual who lives in prolonged shame? They have no calculation; only a decision that is always already insured as a *rule* (here we may want to ask if it is not possible to replace *rule* with dictatorship or total war, or many other terms?)

The dialectical image, then, produces a critique of progress by putting into tension the olden modernity with the newly modern, but it also redeems the modern by bringing to light “the silent flame of an immemorial ethos”.<sup>27</sup>

Standing in sharp contrast to this silent flame, modernity wants us to believe there is only truth, the death of God, visibility, aesthetics and science, history and forgetting: monuments or no monuments. Yes, we have already seen this. But where does the silent flame leave us in relation to modernity? We have followed an intuition. Again, we ask; “who still on a battlefield wants a monument?” And what does all this have to do with our guide, memory, place and tactics. Well, as we have already seen, history kills memory. On the other

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<sup>26</sup> Derrida 16.

<sup>27</sup> This line is taken from a passage by Agamben describing a text by Foucault, entitled “The Life of Infamous Men”. Agamben says the text was to be a preface for an anthology of archival documents. Describing the text Agamben says: “[...] In the very moment in which it marks them with infamy, the encounter with power reveals human existences that would otherwise have left no trace of themselves. What momentarily shines through these laconic statements are not the biographical events of personal histories, as suggested by the pathos-laden emphasis of a certain oral history, but rather the luminous trail of a different history. What suddenly, comes to light is not the memory of an oppressed existence, but the silent flame of an immemorable ethos – not the subjects face, but rather the disjunction between the living being and the speaking being that marks its empty place” (Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* 143).

hand, in its encounters with power, memory finds itself born time and again, not necessarily through willful acts but through a relation to impossibility.<sup>28</sup>

How, then, do we account (as we promised we would) for the renewal and transformation of Addis Ababa, along with its continued smelly, slum-like nature? What comes forth in the dialectical image of Addis Ababa may be “the silent flame of an immemorable ethos”, but as we walk the streets of this city, we also note, this ethos finds it has become increasingly difficult to calculate with the impossible. Only, always, already, there are rules. Increasingly, only rules.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Perhaps it should be made obvious that what we are doing now is rubbing Chapter Three (The Tour) up against Chapter Two (Living Amongst the Billboards). If it is true that in modernity, language, knowledge, reasoning, etc becomes more instrumental, we have also seen that the aesthetic becomes ever increasingly important in order to rescue this instrumentality from becoming too separate from lived, affected experience. However in attempting to bridge the gap between instrumentality and affect, the aesthetic only serves to reify an instrumental approach — it *quiets* another kind of ethical call. Through rubbing Chapter Three with Chapter Two, what seeps out are the consequences of the quieting of this ethical call, the in-between spaces of Addis Ababa; average age of death: 44.

<sup>29</sup> It should also be acknowledged, or at least stated in some fashion or the other that another intuition (assumption?) has been driving much of what has been argued for in this chapter. However, this intuition is far less developed than the intuition in which this chapter is most firmly built on and has been stated in its body. In any case, what I am trying to get at, is that I have sensed a connection between the philosophical premises of Ethiopian talismanic art and Agamben’s testimony. I have come to this intuition through a number of avenues, namely: the paramount importance of the gaze, and the mirror-like reciprocity of the gaze in this practice; the fact that figures derived from the Greek Gorgon (Medusa) are prominent features of Ethiopian talismanic art; and that Agamben, himself, makes a connection between the Gorgon and testimony. He says: “That at the bottom of the human being there is nothing other than an impossibility of seeing – this is the Gorgon, whose vision transforms the human being into a non-human. That precisely this inhuman impossibility of seeing is what calls and addresses the human, the apostrophe from which human beings cannot turn away – this and nothing else is testimony” (Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* 54). Now compare that with Deleuze and Guattari’s description of Ethiopian talismanic art: “On the white surface of the parchment, two black holes are drawn, or an outline of round or rectangular faces, but the black holes spread and reproduce, they enter in redundancy, and each time a secondary circle is drawn, a new blank hole it constituted, an eye is put in. An effect of capturing a surface that becomes more enclosed the more it expands. [...] A multiplication of eyes. The despot or his representatives are everywhere. This is the face seen from the front, by a subject who does not so much see as gets snapped up by the black holes.” (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 182,183. Also see figure 16, below.

Unfortunately, I do not know enough about talismanic art at this point to make an effective argument with regards to my intuition—although I was tempted, nonetheless. This temptation will have to be followed through in another paper, or another thesis, at another time. For more on the gaze in Ethiopian talismanic art, see Jacques Mercier, *The Image as Medicine*. For an example of Ethiopian talismanic art, see fig. 16 below.

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It should be clear by now that this thesis has been arguing that to utter any word today is to bespeak a complex set of histories, discourses, politics and economic systems (amongst other things) colliding on to each other to produce an actualization in now time. Yet we also know that which is received from the past in coming to light in the present is worked over, used in the present moment in a variety of ways, inflected in countless accents: people supplement that which is received, they reject graven images.

To accept anything in now time as given is to betray its complex history, it is to mistake effects for causes, it is to accept graven images. At the same time to accept that all we have is the past is to forget to remember in the countlessness of accents. Thus Arthur Jacobson says:

To be a person is to engage in struggle over rules. Persons are not creatures, herded by rules into neat eternal categories. Persons do not obey rules out of fear of sanctions. They engage rules — put them in play in action.

Positivism and naturalism suppress the character of persons engaging the struggles over rules. Positivism asserts that the struggle is irrelevant, beside the point, a private matter. Naturalism asserts there is no struggle”.<sup>30</sup>

From our point of view, then, one way or another all writing should admit to at least three writings. The first writing would be a relation to an impossibility of writing (messianic time). The second writing would be propositions of what could be said, the third writing would be characters engaging the first two writings: rewriting them, retracing them, rethinking them in view of the countlessness of accents. This, as Arthur

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<sup>30</sup> Arthur Jacobson III.

Jacobson has also pointed out, would be a lesser claim than those of the modern author (see our Introduction). It would be more than what the residents of Addis Ababa seem to have these days.

To conclude, then, we may want to remind ourselves that from the mountain plateaus of Abbyssinia, to the deserts of the Magreb, to the low rumble that emanates from the depannuer round the corner from a house in Montreal, complex technologies of the self, many, many an ethos have been elaborated around hosting the stranger: living with the unsayable. These ethos are not objects to be studied so that we may enhance Man's knowledge of "nature"; they are just what they are: many, many an ethos, and they deserve to be studied, again and again, retraced, rethought, relearnt and rewritten as such.

In naked vulnerability we move towards the work already commenced by the "other" community.

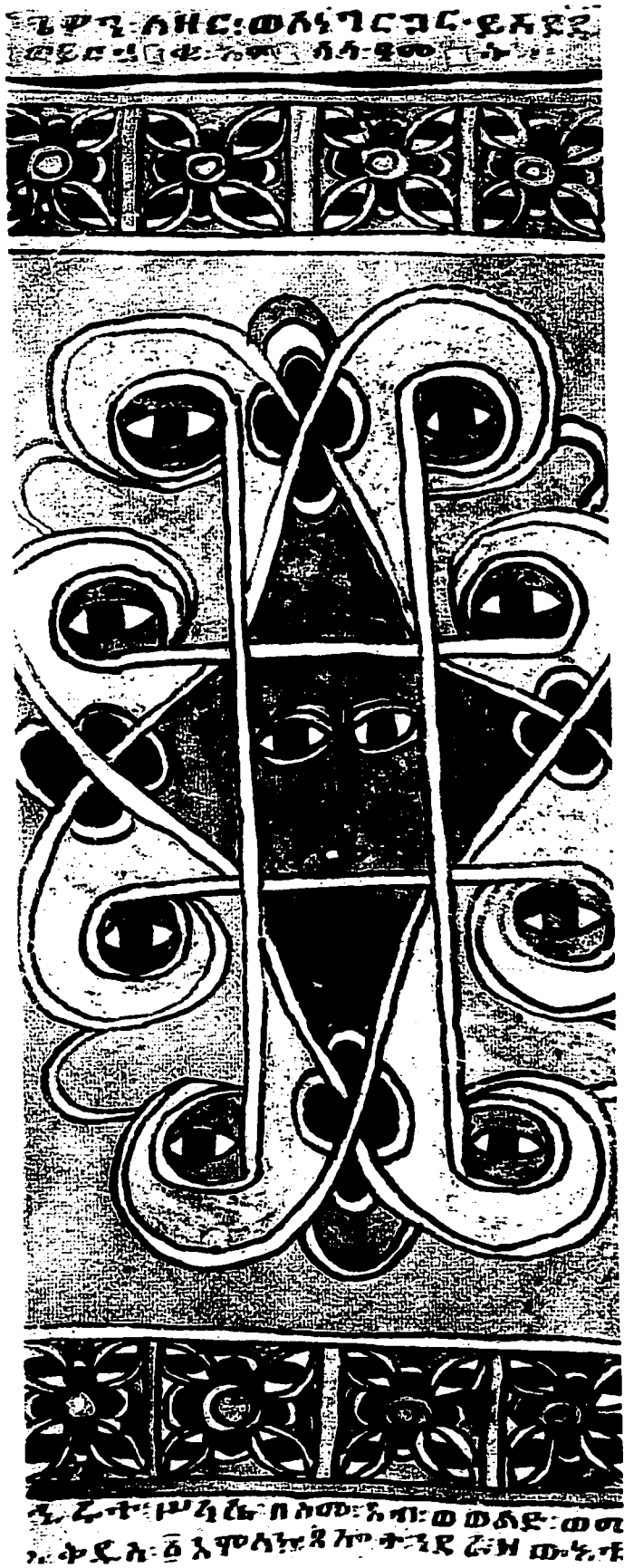


Fig 16. Ethiopian protective scroll, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, parchment. Collection: Musee National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris, in Mercier 88.

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