Polaroid Vision: Thoughts on Nicos Philippou's *Sharqi*

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Abstract

This article performs a reading of Nicos Philippou's **Sharqi**, a collection of 27 Polaroid photographs that depict Cyprus landscapes, and attempts to locate the work's artistic contribution in the larger cultural context of a landscape that emerges behind a mesh of ideologies. In an island where the terrain – physical, cultural, social, political – is always already mapped in ideological coordinates that ground it politically and populate it with a homogeneous people, Philippou's intervention in Sharqi is particularly crucial and even urgent. Philippou creates images that invite an evocation of Sirocco, a South-East wind, as a natural phenomenon whose energy creates various possibilities for artistic transformation. In the process, this collection rebels against the representation of landscape as a signifier of national(ist) belonging. The photographs in this collection occasion a re-colouring of memory, and encourage new associations and interconnections between psyche and place, imaginary topos and homeland, landscape and identity.

Keywords: Polaroid, postcolonial Cyprus, postcolonial identities, Fata Morgana, queer imaginings, simulacra, nationalism, memory

Introduction

Several decades before Nicos Philippou was inspired to produce Sharqi, my sense of Cyprus as a native place was shaped by a popular discourse that created, represented and directed my emotional engagement with the landscape where I felt that I belonged. One moment that reveals the dynamic of such popular discourse at work is the song 'Χρυσοπράσινο φύλλο' (Gold-green Leaf). The song is by Mikis Theodorakis (music) and Leonidas Malenis (lyrics) and was featured in the 1972 documentary To~Nησί~της~Aφροδίτης~(The~Island~of~Aphrodite), the first colour production of the Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation.² My teenage imagination was quite moved by Malenis' sensuous, vivid and lyrical images:

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² M. Theodorakis and L. Malenis, *The Island of Aphrodite*, Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation (1972),

Γη της λεμονιάς, της ελιάς γη της αγκαλιάς, της χαράς γη του πεύκου, του κυπαρισσιού των παλικαριών και της αγάπης

Χρυσοπράσινο φύλλο ριγμένο στο πέλαγο³

Land of lemon and olive trees Land of embrace, and joy Land of pine and cypress Of Young Men and Love

Gold-green Leaf Thrown in the sea⁴

In these lines, the repetition of certain words produces an incantatory effect and the images carry a profound symbolism. These are the ingredients of popular success, and the song moves its audience and evokes strong feelings irrespective of the strength of one's attachment to Cyprus as motherland. Indeed, the lyrics directly address a sense of imagined community. To put it differently, Malenis' lyrics and Theodorakis' composition, sounds a call upon every Greek Cypriot to tune their sense of collective identity and character to the lyrics of this song; hence, its claim to anthem status in Greek discography. Played very frequently on RIK radio (The Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation) throughout the 1970s, 'Gold-Green Leaf' mounted the first comprehensive picture of this island's 'life' and 'character'. This is not simply a song about Cyprus; it is a song that creates Cyprus by telling Cypriot Greeks who, what and how they are, as well as what forms of expression further enhance this romantic construct. The lines engender the island of Cyprus literally and figuratively. They clearly offer the island's set of ideological coordinates, grounding it with geographical territory and populating it with its people by deploying colonially inflected tropes laden with a heavy sense of Greek valour. Malenis' lyrics pres-

available at https://www.digital-herodotus.eu/archive/video/items/3028/to-nesi-tes-aphrodites/.

 $^{^3}$ L. Malenis and M. Theodorakis, 'Gold-Green Leaf' [Recorded by G. Bithikotsis, 1965], *YouTube*. com (13 March 2010), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnDvx7lpDJo. The lyrics are provided in Greek at http://www.stixoi.info/stixoi.php?info=Lyrics&act=details&song_id=656&hl=χρυσοπράσινοαααφύλλο . The nationalist comments offered by subscribers in response to the song deserve a separate study.

⁴ My translation.

ent Cyprus in flesh and bone as an avatar of itself that becomes the 'hyperreality', to use Baudrillard's term that public consciousness is called upon to embrace as 'reality for its own sake, the fetishism of the lost object'. Gregoris Bithikotsis sang this song with the voice that endowed post-World War II Greece with its commercial ethos. With Bithikotsis' voice and Theodorakis' bouzouki instrumentation, Greek musical culture acquired a recognisable quality with a huge marketing potential. An avid listener and a keen fan of Greek popular music, I came to these realisations long after the memory of our small transistor radio faded into a mournful longing for a return to moments that fashioned my sensibility; the radio was always on and I was always a passionate listener.

It is perhaps not coincidental that the stanza in the heart of Maleni's poem, the stanza that bespeaks disaster and desolation, makes reference to *livas*, the South-Western wind that is akin to the sirocco from the South-East. Philippou's collection, *Sharqi*, is named after the sirocco, which blows in Cyprus and in most countries that line the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. In Malenis' poem, the *livas* brings destruction to Cyprus:

Γη του ξεραμένου λιβαδιού γη της πικραμένης Παναγιάς γη του λίβα, τ' άδικου χαμού τ' άγριου καιρού, των ηφαιστείων

Land of dried up pasture
Land of embittered Mother Mary
Land of Livas and unjust loss
Fierce weather and volcanoes (My translation)

The lyrics suggest that disaster is not endemic to this blessed island, but comes from the South-West – a plague that strikes this idyllic, 'Cyprus of love and dream'. This frail and yet eloquent place that is also deeply religious in the orthodox tradition of Christianity, drifts innocently and charmingly on the surface of the sea. Cyprus is vulnerable but also blessed and rendered powerful due to the passion and virtue that it generates. What helps it despite of its shortcomings is its religious commitment to love and dream and its oneiric, gender-norms abiding Hellenic in-

J. Baudrillard, 'Selected Writings', Mark Poster (ed.), (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 145.

habitants (Hellenism as an identity is quite prominent in the documentary *The Island of Aphrodite*).

Are there ways to recover landscape enlisted in the service of nationalist ideologies? How can a place be remapped and re-inscribed in ways that offer new imaginings away from the master narratives that dominate its articulation and daily consumption? My brief critical introduction to the song 'Gold-green Leaf' and the culture it has generated is tinted by a heavy dose of longing for past moments whose allure is difficult to resist. Yet, can we revisit terms such as 'nostalgia', but in a manner that is useful and productive in terms of their relationship with sensibility and landscape? These are the questions that motivate this article. Their articulation acquired a fresh potency when Nicos Philippou's Sharqi, a collection of 27 polaroid photographs depicting Cyprus landscapes, was exhibited at the Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre in January 2016, and published in book form at the same time. "Sharqi" is Arabic and its use here is significant, as Liz Wells reminds us: 'it questions Cyprus' identity given its position in the Eastern Mediterranean as near to Israel and Syria as it is to its nearest European neighbours, Malta and Greece.'6 In a postcolonial island republic where the cultural, social, political, and geographical terrain is already mapped by such images as Malenis', Nicos Philippou's intervention in a collection with a title in Arabic, Sharqi, occasions a radically revised gaze upon the landscape of memory and lived reality. The Sirocco is evoked as a natural phenomenon whose energy carries with it various possibilities for artistic transformations and a re-imagining of landscape with spatiality in ideological matrices; hence, the appeal of this collection. I find it is invested with urgency and comes to disrupt the constructed images that stand for the reality of our experience. The disruption occurs not only because Philippou turns our attention to images that skew the established orthodoxy, it occurs also because the aesthetic of the polaroid images intervene at all levels of the interaction; between the object represented and its mode of representation, and between the artistic product and the viewer.

Before I close my introduction, I owe a word of explanation about 'thoughts' in the title. I use it for the purpose of taking advantage of the performative quality of 'thoughts' that can stage an introspective theoretical performance as opposed to the statement made by a confident and well balanced argument. A 2018 article on *Sharqi*, by Elena Stylianou, already addresses some of the questions I pose in the

⁶ Liz Wells, 'Nicos Philippou: Sharqi,' *Exposure Magazine*, available at https://medium.com/exposure-magazine/nicos-philippous-sharqi-4ba4e6cb6f9b

previous paragraph.⁷ In fact, Stylianou's article offers a thorough study that locates this work within a historical context, examines the colonial and postcolonial politics of photographic work produced on Cyprus, and provides a solid theoretical frame for appreciating the work's political and artistic potential. What I hope to achieve in this article is to continue this discussion by offering some elaboration on the cultural significations and associations that *Sharqi* makes possible.

Polaroid Grain and Postcolonial Nostalgia



Postcolonial theories have enabled, among other things, profound reflections on the complex politics of cartography, aesthetics, identity, and landscape. *Sharqi* allows for striking revelations, a re-colouring of memory, and, perhaps most importantly, new associations and interconnections between psyche and place, imaginary topos and homeland. In the words of Dennis Walder, 'memory, or Mnemosyne as the Greeks called her, was the mother of the Muses, and invention or imagination depends utterly upon remembering'. Situating ourselves before the polaroid image

⁷ E. Stylianou and N. Philippou, 'Miniature Landscapes: Sharqi, the instant photograph, and the re-invention of Cyprus', photographies, 12:1 (2019), 99-116. Elena Stylianou is the author of this article. Nicos Philippou's name is co-author because his work is featured in the article.

D. Walder, Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation and Memory (New York: Routledge,

involves us in tracing a thread of meaning that enables us to know or think we know who and what we are in the present. In this process, the landscape in the photograph shifts from being a declaration of public hegemonic avowals to a private decipherment of memory and personal historiography. Nostalgia powers this shift. The polaroid texture invokes a nostalgia that imbues the images. This is not, however, a free and unchecked longing for some past, a longing that might seem predictable considering the texture, intensity, and expression of its pain. The trajectories marked by one's memory transit through the texture and the colour temperature of the Polaroid image. However, seen as a visual performance, this transit is motored by its self-possession and self-importance, intent on portraying itself and indifferent to the subject that may be consumed by nostos. A photographic act that, like a speech act, introduces possibility, makes things happen, and mobilises psychic and sensory mechanisms.

Sharqi offers in terms of image what Edward Said calls 'contrapuntal perspective' and whose usefulness is that it offers a comparative reading of contrasting narratives. Said urges us to investigate our cultural archives in a manner that allows us to reread them 'not univocally but contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts'. Sharqi brings to life a series of portraits that bespeak 'other histories' and other ways of perceiving landscape and identity. And, as it alludes subtly to artistic and literary movements such as postmodernism and postcolonialism, it unsettles the stern discourse of Hellenism in Cyprus.

Simulacrum

I was struck by the image chosen to publicise this collection. An eagle seated on a Corinthian capital. This capital is foregrounded by another column that carries pronounced markings that outline the design of the Corinthian order. And, beyond the strange salience of these simulacra lie the contours of the Cyprus landscape, dull and engaging, familiar and foreign, full of promise but delivering nothing, invoking simultaneously our [my] love and resentment. The eagle becomes the vague referent of some kind of splendour and imperial glory totally removed from reality. The gypsum cast bird is a simulation model whose real life original does not exist

^{2011), 6.}

⁹ E. Said, Culture and Imperialism (New York, NY: Vintage, 1994), 51.



in Cyprus – indeed could not exist in Cyprus because if it did then the sign would be robbed of its referent and rendered useless thereafter. Paradoxically, even the cast mouflon (on page nine of *Sharqi*) produces a similar effect, even though the mouflon is the most representative species of Cyprus wildlife that is endemic and protected. Ultimately, my sense and my reading of the image of the eagle and the mouflon have to acknowledge the Polaroid as an artistic medium and tool. It is the Polaroid that depicts the bird and the wild goat as 'models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal'. ¹⁰ So absolute is the incongruity and so jarring that, suddenly, what becomes possible is the birth of a 'Cyprus' through the crevices of an ostentatious aesthetic.

Fata Morgana

In the artist's statement of intent, incorporated in the press release that announces the launch of the book *Sharqi* and the exhibition at the Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre, Philippou articulates the poetics of the images through interesting language and fascinating associations:

¹⁰ Baudrillard, Selected Writings, 166.

The photographs show aspects of a Cypriot landscape that has been visually silenced: a dry, arid landscape, almost post-apocalyptic, filled with cactuses, reptiles, palm trees, red lakes, but also with man-made industrial and mining remnants, as well as decorative artefacts like fake mouflons, eagles and classic columns. Despite its harshness, this is a landscape that is familiar. And even though the images show the 'other' Cypriot landscape, they are attractive; like Fata Morganas, they feel almost outworldly, like illusions, but again as Fata Morganas, they are seductive and enchanting.

I find it particularly appealing that Fata Morgana makes an entrance into the artist's statement of intent thus adding yet another philological dimension to Philippou's collection of polaroids. According to a medieval legend, she is King Arthur's sister and a woman with magical powers, a sorceress and shape shifter, responsible for the creation of optical illusions, and mirages over bodies of water 11. Apart from introducing lore and the supernatural, this reference to Fata Morgana is also significant because it cites a mythological tradition that points away from classical Greece. Yet, this contrapuntal juxtaposition is not limited to a philological insurrection against the totalising influence of Greco-centric thought that wants Classical Greek mythology to be the only narrative that informs contemporary artistic inspiration. The value of this reference extends to Nicos Kavvadias' popular and controversial poem 'Fata Morgana'.12 There is a great deal to learn from Kavvadias' ritualised reconstruction of experience where pain and decadence are endowed with a mystical purpose. In the language and images of this uniquely gifted poet, exoticism, the voyage, loss, and even physical geography play themselves out in the dark miasma of decadence, wounded resilience, productive sorrow, and a mournful exultation.

But, no mention of Kavvadias' 'Fata Morgana' would be complete without referring to singer-composer Mariza Koch, the first artist who turned serious attention to this poet, and translated into melody and rhythm the colours and the concepts of a selection of his poems. This selection included an excerpt from 'Fata Morgana' and the song became so popular that peoples' homes resonated with Kavvadias' lines through Koch's voice. Her Kavvadias songs marked a turn in her performance

 $^{^{\}mbox{\scriptsize II}}$ Merriam Webster 'Fata Morgana,'available at https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fata%20morgana

¹² N. Καββαδίας, Τραβέρσο (Athens: Kedros, 1975).

M. Koch, Mariza Koch LP (Athens: CBS Records, 1977)

style as she interpreted with pathos and intrinsic awareness the nuanced textures and subtle but complex and shifting emotions of the lines. She used a vocal texture that blended with the orchestra to create an apt sonic staging of the drama of Kavvadias' lines, ¹⁴ and, throughout Koch's compositions, the poet's sombre and forever shifting hues of the world's oceans, and the unsettling play of the demonic and the divine, the beautiful and the grotesque, forever alluring and forever shifting; were very much like the images in *Sharqi* in a vernacular context. Or, as Liz Wells puts it in her astute and knowing commentary on Philippou's collection, '[t]he haze of the surface of the film adds a disquieting shimmer of that which cannot be seen.'¹⁵

Queer Imaginings



The Dead Zone has suffered the pressure of each side to interpret it in ways that agree with nationalist rhetoric. Gazing through a patriotic lens, this zone is legible only as a line that demarcates clearly defined binaries: civilised from uncivilised, conquered from conqueror, victim from perpetrator. And, ultimately, it has become

 $^{^{14}}$ S. Karayanni, 'Nikos Kavvadias', Cadences: a journal of literature and the arts in Cyprus (Vol. 6, Fall 2010), 110.

¹⁵ Liz Wells, "Nicos Philippou: Sharqi," *Exposure Magazine*, available at https://medium.com/exposure-magazine/nicos-philippous-sharqi-4ba4e6cb6f9b

an essential symbol of the destructive war of 1974. Deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of Cypriots of both communities, the zone that divides the island of Cyprus has had a profound effect on the spatial dimension of Cypriots' identity. Buildings that are hopelessly dilapidated, vegetation that is so disorderly and wild that it suggests barrenness more than fertility, ruined houses, uncultivated farmland, and lots of barbed wire; a decades-long process of ideological filtering has turned these signs into standard representations for this in-between space. These are signs of conflict, yet they are also lingering evidence of abuse and violation. ¹⁶

In the popular imagination of contemporary Greek Cypriots, the Dead Zone has become the other space to Hellenic Cyprus, the sign of injustice and lasting victimhood. Philippou's Sharqi sets up a foil to the Dead Zone as a symbolic space and as a political landscape. Apart from the images in the collection that thematise camp garden sculptures, there are others that depict grotesque looking machinery. These images suggest an intimation of industrial surrealism turned to art. Furthermore, the panoramic views of the Cypriot landscape might be seen as picturing an eerie isolation, a space that cannot be readily identified as familiar. This creates an artistic dynamic that in the average Cypriot imagination might be identified with the Dead Zone. This strip of land that accesses its meanings through bare landscapes and apparent desolation has marked every Cypriot's imagination to such an extent that any images of landscapes are perceived in the imagined frame of this no man's land. And meaning is always entwined with the Greek Cypriot's will to show the other side as the perpetrator. The paradox, which may be no paradox at all, is that these same signs also render it strangely attractive and, at times, almost irresistible. Certainly, in this image from Sharqi, we are asked to gaze upon a landscape that does not cite national belonging in any apparent manner, nor does it display visible signs of some established national character. Rather, this is a landscape that appears self-conscious of its drama, draped by a remembering that forever escapes beyond the contours of the background hills. Our expectations are unsettled by a sky that is not marked by the blue that the Cyprus tourism campaigns proudly stress's. Blue is also evocative of the nationalist sentiment often associated with the Greek flag. Here, however, references disintegrate as the narrative layers of the

¹⁶ The Dead Zone is the subject of critical examination S.S. Karayianni, 'Zone of Passions: a Queer Re-imagining of Cyprus's "No Man's Land", *Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies*, Vol. 0, No. 10 (2019), 63-81.

landscape imbricate themselves in the disturbing attraction of the scene that does not entertain our standardised wish for Cyprus' quaint and reassuring poses.

I also feel that the Dead Zone as a narrative of contemporary Cyprus meets Sharqi in its trajectory, but not because it gestures to the established canon of associations of the Dead Zone. Rather, the two encounter each other in the space of queer significations. In order to play and at the same time explore this idea further, I want to focus on an important detail that some of the Sharqi images bring to our attention: that silence and decay are also proving peculiarly photogenic. Sound and silence can have an image and can affect the texture of a photograph. Relying on Sedgwick's description of the expanse of 'queer' as a political term of possibility, I perform a reading of Cyprus' Dead Zone and Philippou's images as continuing on a trajectory rather than standing still in time, and as a movement and motive that is recurrent, eddying, and not only troubling or troubled but 'troublant' as much as it is 'articulant', the first term borrowed from Sedgwick and the second term inspired by her writing.¹⁷ Both terms are performative (like my thoughts in this article) in the sense that they do not intimate a monolithic representation of the images. Rather, they produce a series of effects that aptly convey not only the paradox and complexity of images but also their potential. Sharqi as art resists the normalising regimes and urges for useful and productive ambiguities. Queer re-imaginings can take us across, to domains away from the trappings of bipolar binaries and nationalist essentialisms.

Conclusion

In his 2003 study Εθνική Ομοψυχία και Πολιτική Ομοφωνία (National Homogeneity and Political Consensus), Caesar Mavratsas writes that «ο εθνικισμός δεν αποτελεί απλώς μια πολιτική ιδεολογία, αλλά πρέπει να αναλυθεί και ως ένας ευρύτερος πολιτισμικός λόγος δια του οποίου νοηματοδοτούνται ευρύτερες κοσμοαντιλήψεις και ταυτότητες» [nationalism is not simply a political ideology, but has to be examined as a broader cultural discourse that assigns meaning to larger world views and identities, (my translation)]. 18

Mavratsas' attention to the cultural dimension of nationalism suggests a revised look at the hegemonic reach of its discourse. And, more importantly, it informs

¹⁷ E. K. Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ C. Mavratsas, National Homogeneity and Political Consensus: Atrophy of Greek Cypriot Civil Society at the Beginning of the 21st Century (Athens: Katari, 2003) [in Greek]. 53.

possible approaches to nationalism that consider the crucial dimension of other cultures that enter into dynamic intercourse with world views and identities shaped by nationalist thought, hence *Sharqi*'s relevance and impact. In the words of Elena Stylianou:¹⁹

'The framed, photographed landscapes are small in scale, yet they intend to attack the giant and repetitive narrative of an archetypal Mediterranean topos, offering an alternative reading to overused, mainstream national and cultural understandings of Cypriotness as well as insights into how locality can be renegotiated again and again with references to, motivations from and dialogues with the wider photographic discourse and historical references specific to Cyprus'.

Maleni's 'Gold-green Leaf', the anthem of postcolonial Cyprus, regurgitates 'the giant and repetitive narrative of an archetypal Mediterranean topos', where Cyprus relishes its antique beauty and pristine innocence mixed with a healthy dose of Hellenic heritage and wisdom. The song continues to be played a great deal and remains a favourite not as a work of art, but as a hymn that spells out the commandments of Greek Cypriotness. It remains a point of reference even though its value as an alibi for contemporary degradation is greater than its value as a sacralised text. In other words, it proves quite useful in redirecting attention to what wonderful people we are and what a beautiful island we have, as the song says, even though in reality we are going through an odious and uninspiring decline. In fact, I find it bemusing and saddening at the same time to consider this song in connection with Caesar Mavratsas' 2012 book Η Κοινωνία των Χώρκατων [The Society of Peasants]. With its lofty images and idealist lyrics, the song confirms the odd privilege of the psychosocial individual whose cultural and political awareness is severely curtailed by a perspective that suffers from a self-possessed ignorance.²⁰ Far from acknowledging this perspective and making remedial efforts, the Greek Cypriot boorish mentality insists on turning his inability to privilege (the male pronoun is appropriate here because of its link with patriarchy as the established gender system of Greek Cypriot society). Thus, he remains locked in a position without cultural, artistic, or

¹⁹ E. Stylianou and N. Philippou, 'Miniature Landscapes: *Sharqi*, the instant photograph, and the re-invention of Cyprus', *photographies*, 12:1 (2019), 102.

²⁰ C. Mavratsas, Η Κοινωνία των Χώρκατων: η πολιτισμική και η πολιτική υπανάπτυξη των ελληνοκυπρίων στις απαρχές του 21ου αιώνα (The Society of Peasants: The Cultural and Political Underdevelopment of the Greek Cypriots in the Beginning of the 21st Century) (Athens: Papazisis, 2012) 17.

political promise. Mavratsas asserts that this position is informed by Greek Cypriot nationalism, and I find that it is endorsed by songs such as 'Gold-green Leaf'.

In Philippou's Sharqi, the sirocco replaces the livas and inflects our gaze with the various meanings that it generates, offering possibilities for a revised encounter with the Cyprus landscape, the real and the remembered. In an island where the terrain -cultural, social, and political- is always already mapped in ideological coordinates that ground it politically and populate it with a homogeneous people, Philippou's intervention in Sharqi is particularly crucial. It is invested with urgency as it comes to disrupt the manufacturing of images that are made to stand for the reality of our experience. Baudrillard is concerned that reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another, reproductive medium, such as photography'. 21 Inadvertently perhaps, this collection of Polaroids demonstrates that it is conscious of this concern, and addresses the issue by engaging in the production of anti-picturesque compositions where the lyrical fetishism of a national construction founders in the meticulous attention to queering the landscape, both in the sense of strange and in the sense of theory. Queer theory may enable reflection on issues of identity and its embodied negotiations with power, yielding insights that are often but not always connected with questions of sexuality. 'Queer imagining' implies an exploration of the potential of a topos to inspire emotions, thoughts, and possibilities that reach beyond the dominant narratives, transverse, and go across essentialist national discourses. Such reimagining could not be simply subversive or deconstructive. 'Queer' penetrates deeply into the interstices of history and spatial dynamics, makes silence audible, and, very importantly, renders essentialism awkward. In political terms, queer resists, critiques, and challenges the regulatory practices of power, hence Sharqi's value in contemporary Cyprus politics.

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²¹ Baudrillard, Selected Writings, 144.

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