

## Logic of prelude: on use value, pleasure, and the struggle against agony

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*Tu came to Me-Ti and said: I want to take part in the war of the classes.  
Teach me. Me-ti said: Sit down.*

*Tu sat down and asked: How shall I fight? Me-ti laughed and said: Are you sitting comfortably? I don’t know, said Tu, astonished, how should I sit differently?*

*Me-ti explained it to him. But, said Tu impatiently, I didn’t come to learn how to sit. I know, you want to fight, said Me-ti patiently, but for that you must be sitting comfortably, since we’re sitting right now and want to learn sitting down.*

*Tu said: If you’re always looking to find the most comfortable position and to make the best of current circumstances, in short, if you’re striving for pleasure, then how can you fight? Me-ti said: If you’re not striving for pleasure and don’t want to make the best of current circumstances and aren’t looking to adopt the best position, what’s the point of fighting?<sup>1</sup>*

Bertolt Brecht, or more precisely the wise character of Me-Ti who is the protagonist of his *Book of Interventions in the Flow of Things*, asks here a crucial question for the present times: how to reclaim pleasure as a revolutionary force?

How to turn the present into the habitat of a force of pleasure that could support a desire for futurity, along with the efforts towards, and the persistence of a struggle for, a different futurity?

How to reclaim the present as a territory of pleasure, which is a prelude and an outpost of revolutionary thinking? How to reclaim for the present a mode of action emancipated from the expectation of its own future?

This question appears to be a central one for contemporary biopolitics. It seems especially crucial today, at a time characterized by a condition such that any form of doing ends up being deprived of its own duration: our doing – we could call it work, but it would be more precise to regard it simply as ‘human activity’ – is always projected toward the future (a future of potential value, a possible payoff, an horizon of crisis and vulnerability) and at the same time it is stuck in a past full of other fragments of present that were never ‘actualized’: fragments of labor that never became value, that never gained the right to a productive or existential continuity. Such is, for example, the preparatory work for many projects that will never become reality, and will remain suspended, as in a spell, in a condition of eternal preliminaryity. In the present, the moment when we can rightfully call ourselves ‘producers’ is always postponed, according to a logic that constantly expands the future as horizon of possible value realization, and at the same time freezes the immanent enjoyment that should stand at the core of any form of production.

Everywhere I looked, over the years, I have encountered a multitude of workers whose lifetime is not precisely occupied with actual production, but is progressively eaten up by the urge to secure the conditions for possibly producing, or having a part in production. On an international level, institutional structures have been developed to make this procedure indispensable, transforming the condition of ‘preliminaryity’ – the phase of preparation, sketching, foretasting work to come – into a crucial predicament of contemporary conditions of production and professional employment in the cultural or academic sectors. Both structures of funding for projects and forms of recruitment are organized today mostly according to the project logic and depend on the writing and submission of applications in order to be realized. Likewise, professional competencies are supposed to be routinely re-fashioned, tailored or packaged to compete with others, in order to acquire means of sustenance for fragmented portions of work. Applications are later evaluated by a selection committee, who will maybe grant the possibility, for the candidate, to get funding and pursue the ideas sketched out in the project for a certain amount of future; or else, to be temporarily employed for performing a job for which the candidate proposes herself suitable for. In both cases, even successful applications will soon throw the candidate back to the point of departure: preparing a new and different application for getting economic support for another bit of future. In so many ways, human activity in the present is crushed between chasing after this future, and a past of actions that were never accomplished. In this present, human activity is subsumed in advance as potential exchange value and also deprived of the necessary élan to affirm itself as *autopoiesis*.

To imagine other temporalities, other modes of production, is necessary to focus on what moves, from within the position we occupy, the desire to produce: a production that is not only economic, but social, affective, political. Because any form of production is, at its core, transformation of creative matter: it is production and extension of a world. As in the exchange between Tu and Me-ti, in order to even start imagining an

action that could be called revolutionary, it is vital to reclaim the pleasure of learning to at least imagine another present. By doing this, it is maybe possible to exit the eternal ante-chamber where all present is kept prisoner.

### *The autonomy of the prelude*

I propose to claim for the present the logic intrinsic in the temporality of the prelude. I want to think of the prelude as a force of resistance enacted from within the continuously fragmented mode of production that neoliberalism imposes upon work today: a mode of production that posits the future as permanently possible and hardly ever realized as praxis.

The idea of prelude impinges upon our imagination of futurity: it has the potential to trouble the progressive horizon of a future yet to come, where the most important matter dwells, and whose advent, whose actualization, the present of the prelude supposedly strives for and prepares. This, in principle, would be the predicament of the prelude: to be a unit of work meant to be preliminary to a whole, entrusted as a space of development only as long as its finality will follow. The history of the prelude, however, is an instance of resistance to such a predicament. It is an example of subtle resistance from *within* such a predicament of preliminaryity.

Designating various types of musical pieces in free form used as introduction to a broader composition, the prelude came into use in Hellenic times, and its existence possibly dates back to an even earlier period: in Homeric poems, the prelude was already employed to mark the passage from improvisation to composition in the frame of Aedic chants. Later on, classical civilization handed over the prelude form to Christianity, where it became an element of the *ars trobadorica* and was also recouped in liturgical music. In this context, the prelude became a musical introduction with the function to mark the beginning, and at the same time to establish a tonality, which would allow the plurality of instruments and voices to tune in. The prelude as a form of preliminary intonation became distinctive of 16th century music, especially in organ compositions, such as those composed in Spain by Cabezón. Over time, this organist tradition exceeded its liturgic functions and was consolidated as a composition with intrinsic aesthetic value: over the 16th century the prelude began to feature in Suites for organ, keyboard, and harpsichord in alternative function to the *Ouverture*.

*(Prelude in the Dorian Mode, Antonio de Cabezón, arr. P. Grainger)*

Since the 17th century, however, the prelude has come to ultimately sabotage the structures in which it was originally embedded: the form acquired an autonomous status. The most prominent examples of such a shift are the piano pieces of Bach, Chopin, Debussy, Rachmaninov. In other words, since the 17th century, the prelude has become a self-accomplished compositional model, seemingly enjoyed by composers who explore its capacity of playing with its introductory, anticipatory role while affirming itself as finished work. Since then, the prelude announces a continuity, whilst

expanding the space of beginning of the present. It is often performed on its own, as a standalone piece: as the focalization of a promise that does not need any development to acquire value.

If we think of the prelude as an autonomous form we recognize that it is different from a mere start, and it is also distinctively detached from an idea of origin. In fact, this form is not progressive: it is pure inauguration. Hence, the prelude uses the idea of *progression toward* only in order to experiment with its own autonomy: temporal progression is the compositive grammar of its formal subversion.

### *One. Two. Three*

The value of the prelude is, in principle, its 'use' as anticipation: it measures the emergence and focus of a crystal of creative matter. Yet, the logic of the prelude – or so I propose to regard it – mocks the structure of valorization that is intrinsic to the idea of a complete work: it occupies surreptitiously its progressive temporality, without actualizing it.

In it in this sense that even beyond the music genre, I suggest that we could recognize the prelude form at work in various instances of production, as if foretasting a particular relation between the past, the present and the future. It is in this sense that I propose to read as a prelude the protest song 'Ludiata Nangwi', written in 1968 by Joseph M'Belolo Ya M'Piku, Congolese situationist who remained for a long time a marginal figure in the main histories of Situationism.

This song was donated to his friend Raoul Vaneigem as a passionate gift to a revolutionary struggle which, in the Paris of 1968, took shape first of all as an image and an experience of pleasure, before and beyond a concrete actualization, before and beyond the future: for example, beyond a future in which the radicality of the Situationist movement would be largely cannibalized, precisely by that society of spectacle which was at the core of its critique. The lyrics of the song, recovered a few years ago by the artist Vincent Meessen, were learned once again and sung by M'Belolo Ya M'Piku in the video *One. Two. Three.*<sup>2</sup>

In *One. Two. Three* Joseph M'Belolo Ya M'Piku sings his song, which he had forgotten, while a group of Congolese female musicians tune in accord their instruments, gradually converging into a common tune, anticipating and preparing the melody they will play all together in the end. They do so in the corridors of the club Un Deux Trois in Kinshasa, once upon a time the house of the Ok Jazz Orchestra of Franco Luambo. This is a place that is loaded with a complex, ambiguous and stratified history, a place resonating with the echoes of other rumbas, with the echoes of other possible revolutions. The song tells that 'power is slavery' and that 'it is the same struggle we are fighting for'; it insists that 'all problems come from waiting.' Outside the club, new popular revolts are putting Kinshasa on fire once again coloring with pink clouds the streets surrounding the building.

The prelude constructs a position for imagination, where pleasure not only supports, but establishes and enacts a thought of emancipation: it is the pleasure found in a song, the possibility to linger on its rhythm, to experiment with a mode of operating oblivious of its own development as future. Like many partisan songs of the Second World War and the revolutionary songs of May 1968, 'Ludiata Nangwi' has the cyclic structure of lullabies: it is meant to support the duration of an action while at the same time healing the wounds of the past, it projects the rhythm towards a revolution which, in the time of the song, is always forthcoming, and will not terminate with the end of the song. Like a lullaby, revolution songs are meant to lead towards rest without postulating a progressive sequence whatsoever. Like a prelude, they seem to open a position of pleasure in the line of time. By doing so, they anticipate futurity, in that futurity is offered access to an imagination, a rhythm, a duration. Such songs enable pleasure in the present to become the measure of a possible life, of a possible revolution.

### *The logic of the prelude*

The present needs the logic of the prelude: it needs to reclaim a time of beginning, capable of hosting the possibility of duration. My intuition is that, like a prelude, the present can be reconfigured as a time projected toward the future, but autonomous from its development. This time shall not withdraw itself from futurity, but shall look after the capacity to build ever-new beginnings. It will be a time shielding the use value of an action emancipated from its own development, but also capable of memory, of learning and, most of all, of pleasure.

Another form where the logic of the prelude can be seen at work is, I think, the *oeuvre* of the philosopher Charles Fourier, which is a radical experiment in prefiguring futurity by means of an intense state of pleasure. In a sense, his *Theory of the Four Movements* can be read precisely according to a logic of prelude with regard to the idea of revolution and to the horizon of a different future: curiously, the book was conceived over a period of four months between 1803 and 1804, while the author was waiting to start a job which had been promised to him, and decided to spend his time figuring out a way to make mankind happy.<sup>3</sup> Fourier did so, or so it seems, beyond the expectation to obtain any practical result, but as a sheer *jeu d'esprit*.<sup>4</sup> During this time he imagined a system of relations between humans (and, for that matter, non-humans too) where pleasure would not have to be measured; a system where pleasure would be immeasurable; in sum, he imagined a system where pleasure would be itself a measure. And it seems not by chance that in Fourier's work such train of thought developed by means of a delicate dance of literary preludes, which acquired a multiplicity of unstable and inventive names: *Prolégomenes*, *Préambule*, *Intermède*, *Cislégomenes*, *Extroductio*, *Arrière-propos*, *Antienne*, *Cis-Médiate*, *Trans-Médiate*, *Intra-pause*, *Cis-Laude*, *Ultra-pause*, *Ultraloguse*, *Ultienne*, *Postienne*, *Post-ambule*.

The prelude is an intermittent actualization of a horizon of the possible. It is the sort of production that occupies surreptitiously the durations of capitalism (its projective temporality, its obstinate transformation of use in consumption, the violence of its

crises and its borders) and institutes an autonomous temporality for the imagination of a possible joy. It is the work which inhabits and establishes an autonomous time lag, one which escapes the logic according to which the present is posited as a progressive fall toward death — a fall which is alternatively called border, unemployment, bankruptcy, exclusion from majoritarian economic systems, advent of the war; in other words, the prelude fights against capitalism's logic of agony.

In the prelude, the work of the present and the imagination of the future reconfigure themselves as *autopoiesis*, disobeying all together the logic of progressive valorization. A traction upon the future is thus enacted: the duration of the beginning is expanded, not measured against the accomplishment of a future action. Such disobedience posits pleasure as the creative matter where a polis can exist, where a different measure could be invented.

The logic of the prelude is one of resisting agony in the present, restoring the lightness of becoming which is proper to any futurity, liberating the act of doing from the future which currently intoxicates the temporality of work. It is a logic reclaiming the use value of futurity, and its autonomy. After all, as Bachelard once put it, the future is nothing 'but a prelude, a musical phrase that proceeds and tries itself out – a solitary phrase. It is only through such a brief overture that the world prolongs itself. In the symphony that is being created, the future is assured by but a few musical measures.'<sup>5</sup>

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Notes:

1. Bertolt Brecht, Me-Ti. *The Book of Interventions in the Flow of Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p.164 ↵
2. This work was presented for the first time in the Belgian pavilion of the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. ↵
3. Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, edited by Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). ↵
4. Charles-M. Limousin, *Le Fouriérisme* (Paris, 1898), p.3. ↵
5. Gaston Bachelard, *The Intuition of the Instant* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, [1974]2013), p.31 ↵