

# “With being nothing.”

Jan Bryant

Act 1: Enter the Corporation:

*A corporate-ready body, a pair of wretched heels, a suit, a little too tight, an unassuming wash of lipstick, a subtle emphasis on the eyes, and I won't forget to focus on my augmented breasts, a small slither of cleavage, and (as with Laresa's base material, her found stock footage) I'll assume an air of 'professionalism' by grafting the general will of the corporation onto my psyche ... And if this be too hard, then I can access a 'discrete service offered to elite clients', to have my neural codes reordered to better adapt my personality to the needs of the corporation. Corporate 'Professionalism'!*

They are aloof, the images from Laresa's *New Futures™* (2021), distant in that finely calibrated way that makes digital feel colder than analogue. No imperfections or glitches. The images are smooth, corporate-like, bland, and, as with all thinly gilded chimera, they assume an aura of depth while glistening nothing more than a hollow vessel. And yet the fiction is only a whisper away from an imaginable reality. Rearranging neural codes to perfect synthetic personalities will better equip participants for competitive individualism, for the myth of exceptionalism. It is the next step after the physical rearrangement of the vessel's implicit beauty.

For *New Futures™*, Laresa pulled together a story from the madness of capitalism, offering humour as a momentary respite. We laugh at the droll absurdity that all our worldly values have been reduced to a single monetary logic (like profiting from the care of others and the well-being of the earth...). It is killing us, this world in which capitalism is precipitously entwined with science and technology. And since it has been shown that wealth is accumulated on the back of natural disasters,<sup>2</sup> our planet's survival will continue to be held hostage to a profit and loss spreadsheet.

“The impression that humanity has fallen under the domination of unreason or madness [*déraison*] overwhelms our spirit...”<sup>3</sup> How did we get here?

Act 2: Enter the Hackers:

Synthetic personalities are bolstering a bullish market. But the market is vulnerable. It rewards originals over copies, even original copy-copies. Hackers, longing for a return to aimless meandering, insert actors into the part of synthetic personalities. Ah! It is a step too far...

*In a haze of hacker clichés, of secret locations, of hoodies and beards, of multiple screens and data, and the sense that separation from the computer will induce in me a deep fear of homelessness. A buzzing neural nervousness pervades my atmosphere.*

The market crashes on the news of the hackers' successful destruction of the value of an asset's authenticity. The market of abstraction struggles to incorporate further layers of abstraction wrought by these new invaders, these synthetic-synthetics.

Act 3: Enter the actors:

The spread of commodities, of synthetics, continues to be accompanied by questions of authenticity. Ah! the tortured relationship of counterfeit brands to originals looms once again, despite each being as empty of 'reality' as the other. The brand's territory will be guarded by capitalist apologists who work to keep it 'safe', like warrior nannies coddling and slapping at the same time.

The actors rebel.

*We are the saviours of artifice, of fiction, and while we play with the 'real' and with pretence, we have our feet firmly on theatrical ground. We are chameleons, turned into hackers, executing a viral attack on the hacker body itself. But our actual battle is with the 'fourth wall', the line between our actor selves and our audiences, a fight to remain visible, while also being allowed to sink wholly and dangerously into character.*

These our actor-rights and our sovereign territory!

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Act 4: Enter the Deposed King: “This economy of means, which transforms the body of the condemned (and of the assaulted more generally) into its own hangman, presents an outline of the modern subject in negative relief.”<sup>4</sup>

Power/Powerlessness.

To connect with Laresa’s ongoing concern for the way the body is affected by capitalism, this piece began with an attack on professionalism and its relation to powerlessness. Corporate professionalism is a pejorative for those who choose to ‘look’ in from the outside, we who are dedicated to unending dissensus. At one minute I am a corporate functionary and at another a hacker. Or am I always an actor? Our only hope is to be too mouthy, too sloppy, too critical, too naughty...“For consent is one of those notions, like obedience and legitimacy, and, conversely, compulsion and coercion, that surround the mystery of power [*pouvoir*] as ‘action on actions’, as the art of making others do something.”<sup>5</sup>

Laresa ends her film with a soliloquy from Shakespeare’s dethroned Richard II. To be kinged again, not to be kinged, to be beggar, or not... His (disingenuous) plea—“With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased / With being nothing”—is shown in *New Futures™* to be a false desire. The protagonists—the corporate vessels, the nostalgic hackers and the jealous actors—are desperately trying to protect their perceived ‘profiles’, but instead, they illuminate the myths of the market, the myth of the unique image, the shallowness of the brand. The market’s real power (its truth) is its facility to copy, absorb, and sell back the mythology of originality (the brand) making a failure out of acts of dissension.

In the next stanza, Richard II says, “This music mads me; let it sound no more.”<sup>6</sup> This is a cry that still resonates in our strange era of neoliberal-illogical-logic. Even though power is more diffuse, less locatable, the impact seems to affect our bodies and psyches in a similar way, as though a maddening thread strangles us from the depths of another time. In the metonym of the crown of Richard II. We are now all kings in our madness.

## Endnotes

1. William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of Richard the Second, (Richard II)*, Act V, Scene V, c.1595.
2. ‘Disaster capitalism’ is a term first used by Naomi Klein (2007) and adopted as the title of Antony Lowenstein’s book to describe the profits made from disasters and crises. *Disaster Capitalism: Making a Killing out of Catastrophe* (London; New York: Verso, 2015), p.15.
3. Bernard Stiegler, (trans.) Daniel Ross, *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, Mass, US: Polity, 2015), p.15.
4. Elsa Dorlin, “What a Body Can Do”, *Radical Philosophy* 2.05, Autumn 2019, p.4.
5. Frédéric Lordon, *Capitalisme, désir et servitude* (2010) “Chapter Two: Joyful Auto-Mobiles (Employees: How to Pull Their Legs)” (trans.) Gabriel Ash, *Willing Slaves of Capital Spinoza and Marx on Desire* (London; New York: Verso, 2014).
6. *Richard II*, Act V, Scene V.