

Still Passing: Crisis, Youth and the

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One day in early 2012, Portuguese photographer Inês D'Orey was walking downtown in the city of Oporto when she spotted a graffito stencilled on one of the walls of the Carlos Alberto Theatre. It consisted of a map of Portugal overwritten with the ochre-coloured words *Continuamos à espera que o nevoeiro passe* (“We keep on waiting for the fog to pass”). (Fig. 1) The sight inspired D'Orey to launch herself into the production of a new photography and video series as a reflection on the aesthetico-political as well as existential associations between fog, waiting, and crisis in the Portuguese contemporary. “Waiting in the fog” is a local proverbial saying, shared by the educated and non-educated alike, commonly evoked to characterize, often deprecatingly, the tendency towards inaction by an individual or by the Portuguese in general. It is an expression that frames a qualitative assessment of local economies of action in association with what Vincent Crapanzano calls “optative attitudes,”² that is, temporal qualities of moods that are conducive to action or inaction. From a theological-political perspective, the expression “waiting in the fog” is a referential sign indexing a locally shared structure of expectation—attuned to a certain atmospheric thickness—about the future. Grounded in local messianic thinking, it extends what Raymond Williams called “a structure of feeling” beyond a particular generation (as he presumed) to encompass a shared trans-historical time.

The sight of the same graffito inspired the debut of the activist movement *Geração à Rasca* (“The Precarious Generation”), the Portuguese counterpart to the *Indignados* of Spain. The encounter with the image of a people “waiting in the fog” generated a disturbance, a hitch in the tissue of self-perception, in a time when forms of political protest were unfolding around the globe. The connotations of passivism such a scene entertains prompted the desire in young activists for an event that would break through the taken-for-granted horizon. It became the generative grounds for an aesthetics of activism whereupon event as a temporal correlate to a conscious political gesture would be able to overpower a lingering environment. This fact became intensified in the March 2011 nationwide demonstrations, which brought thousands of young people across the country to the streets and plazas. The sudden nature with which the demonstrations took place on 12 March 2011 was such, though, that what was being celebrated in the first

1 Inês D'Orey, Limbo, 2012, www.inesdorey.com/index.php?projectos/limbo.

2 See Vincent Crapanzano, “Reflections on Hope as a Category of Social and Psychological Analysis,” Cultural Anthropology 18, no. 1 (2003): 3–32; and “Co-Futures (Commentary on Guyer),” American Ethnologist 34, no. 3 (2006): 422–425.

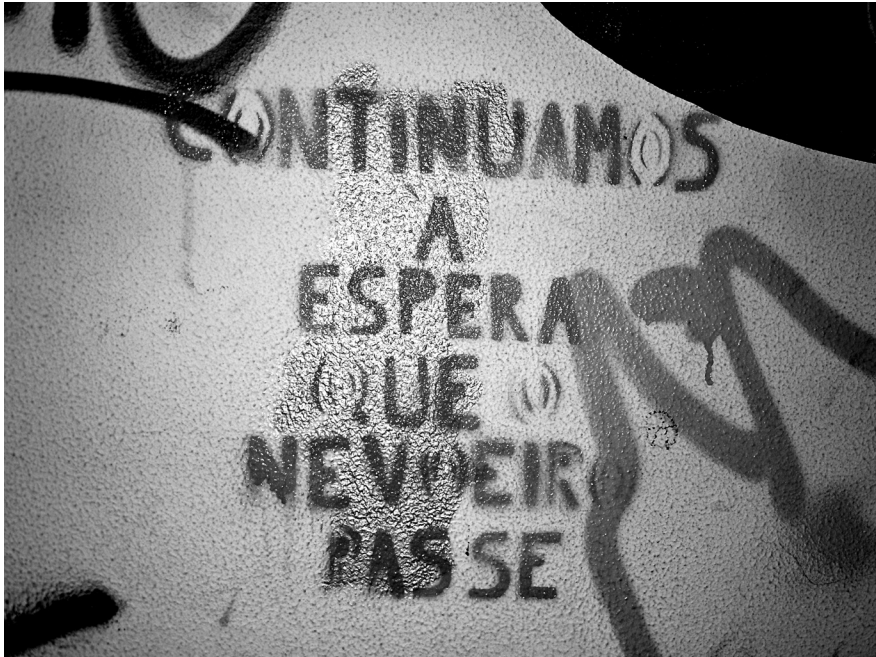


Fig. 1 Graffito stenciled on the wall of the São Carlos Theatre, Oporto. Photo by Patricia Guarda.

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place was that “action” itself was finally taking place, and that a “waiting” had been interrupted. But was it really so? As many activists expressed during and after the protests, the message to be conveyed, above all, was that a protest was in fact happening.

Thus the message turned into its event, what Michel Foucault calls its “eventalizing.” For Foucault, to eventalize is, above all, “a procedure of analysis, that is, a moment to reflect on the epistemological implications of using such a term in relation to the normative, everyday, continuous time in opposition to which it is conventionally posed. Rather than an interruption in time, Foucault thus argues that eventalization means rediscovering the connections ... and plays of forces, strategies and and so on, which at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being universal and ... necessary.”³ Rather than interrupting and disrupting the ordinary, this specific event of activism reproduced the same short temporal horizon, the same existential frame, associated with waiting in the fog: a “waitivism” or untoward activism. Perhaps this waitivism, this lack of action that is not inaction, is what Lauren Berlant has in mind when she speaks of “animated suspension” rather than “suspended animation,” a going that does not go anywhere but moves with

3 Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method,” The Foucault Effect: Studies on Governmentality, ed. Graham Burchell et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 76–77.

all the energies it can; it is what in her wonderful prose Berlant describes as “a paddling” in the fluid historical present.⁴

The scenario of “waiting in the fog” can be traced back to a sixteenth-century foundational moment—or error—in the history of the Portuguese empire: the legendary disappearance of the body of Sebastian, King of Portugal, while fighting the armies of Abd el-Malek in northern Morocco on 4 August 1578. At just twenty-four years of age, the radical bachelor Don Sebastian had been the darling of the Portuguese nobility, but his messianic crusading missions to North Africa proved to be disastrous. Despite warnings from his closest allies, the young king could not be swayed from invading Moorish territories. The result was an enormous loss of human life, a severe economic crisis, and as the king left no successor, the loss of political autonomy to the Spanish court. According to legend, King Sebastian will return one foggy morning to rescue his country and fulfill its glorious destiny. When impostors and pseudo-Sebastians rose repeatedly to claim the identity of the missing monarch, however, they were sent one by one off to the galleys. The return was repeatedly promised but ever postponed. Over time, the missing body of the king evolved into a site where a general longing was articulated—as framed by the Portuguese phenomenon of *saudade*,⁵ and sustained by the very poetics of deferral of the body-territory that undergirds the legend of Sebastian. This messianic myth, locally known as Sebastianism, forms the theological-political foundations or primary location for what will be recognized as an attitudinal tendency amid the Portuguese for “waiting in the fog.” But it also forms the experiential basis for local economies of action, of flow and arrest, of desire and deferral in relation to a particularly indiscernible temporal horizon. How does this picture of “waiting in the fog” for the return of the saviour affect local conceptions of temporality? Also, how does fog as the local indexing of crisis affect local orientations toward time? And how does the proverbial attitude of waiting interact with logics of emergence that have been incorporated in the tactics used by contemporary activism?

While a great deal of analysis of contemporary forms of activism focuses on how it spreads around the world, little or no attention has been given to the trans-historical force of narratives, both textual and/or oral, that can structurally affect

4 Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 199.

5 The notion of *saudade* is, as most Portuguese would agree, extremely hard to define and, at least to my mind, this difficulty is part of the definition itself. This very indiscretion of the term has, therefore, inspired volumes. The simplest definition is used to explain the feeling of missing something or someone. *Saudade*, however, can also refer to a missing for something one never had, as in Pessoa’s verse: “I’m just dreaming and longing. And how gracious white the landscape that I do not know, seen from behind the window of the home that I will never get!” In any case, the emphasis of *saudade* is not on lack per se, but in the fact that one owns a lack or an absence.

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the constitution of particular temporal horizons. Because so much of the discourse on contemporary activism is tied to ideas of emergence and spontaneous action, the question of how forms of emergence arise in articulation with particular traditions is left unaddressed. The global nature of protest tends to favour spatial metaphors like diffusion and contagion, rather than temporal terms like latency and tradition. For the Portuguese who sit “waiting in the fog,” what does it mean to speak of a lack of vision in the current contemporary crisis? What model of action and activism could evolve from Sebastianism as a recurrent theme cutting beneath, and from time to time erupting into, the surface of Portuguese history? These are questions that complicate the clear demarcations between economies of agency involving action, inaction, passivity, and impassivity.

Limbo (2012), the photographic and video work that emerged from D’Orey’s reflection on the words “we keep on waiting for the fog to pass,” consists of a series of staged portraits of young people, both female and male, amid the ongoingness of fog passing. As the statement attached to D’Orey’s work clarifies, “Limbo contemplates what it is to exist in an indefinite and uncertain state. By portraying young protestors, Inês D’Orey

Still Passing: Crisis, Youth, and the Political Economy of Fog in Limbo proposes a reflexive perspective on a revolted and outraged generation that is at the same time paralyzed in a state of suspension and anticipation.” Each photo shows a single individual, an activist, in an attitude of internalized-corporeal resignation. The atmosphere is at once too thick and too transitive to grasp its limits. Nothing in their bodily economy of gestures shows forwardness in motion. The fog is *still* and is still *passing*. In the *stills*, arms and legs are crossed, hands recess into pockets, faces hibernate, eyes fade and doze off, away from the photographic present. The transitive and ongoing stretching of fog highlights the numb immutability of the protagonists enveloped in it. Fog distends beyond the visible space of the photograph into the intimate feeling of its occupier who, one would be surprised to learn, ultimately refuses to yield to the idea that there is nothing there on the far side. Such minor moments blast across the surface and become one with the fog in ways that formally recall Caspar David Friedrich’s brush work in “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog” (1818), as the eye of the wanderer moves through and above the wreath of fog. Yet, unlike in Friedrich’s painting, there is no point of transcendence and elevation above the temporal medium of fog in D’Orey’s photographic work. Here the fog itself is the horizon. Means and ends coincide to form what Agamben calls a “means without ends,”⁶ or appears in Benjamin as, a “mediality that would be immediate.”⁷ To be sure, this commingling of medium and ends is not to say that there is no horizon as such—only that the horizon *is* the medium/means. What goes under the name of horizon is nothing but the space of negotiation or decision of what is possible and not possible. Precisely that space of negotiation of possible perspectives, of possible paths, of possible choices—and the impasse that ensues—is what constitutes a moment of crisis expressed in the atmospheric and temporal idiom of fog.

The incapacity to see beyond the fog, where its contours begin or end, generates uncertainty. The “Precarious Generation” manifesto (written by four Portuguese university students, and which would launch them and others as the country’s main activist youth movement) makes explicit the connection between uncertain horizons and the institutionalization of precarious work. In Portugal, this institutionalized precarity became particularly systematized through the state-implemented system

6 Giorgio Agamben, Means Without End: Notes on Politics, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

7 Walter Benjamin, quoted in Samuel Weber, Benjamin’s-abilities (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 221.

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of *recibos verdes* (“green receipts”). First introduced in the mid-1980s, this system consists of a parallel, and now vastly widespread, state-form of tax benefit that encourages short-term working contracts. As the ruling party put it at the time, the “green receipt” system aims at “recycling and realigning the labour market” towards more “flexible relations between supply and demand.” The fast and expanding systematization of short-term jobs, often supported with European Community funds, led to a multiplication of Post-Fordian work-related categories (e.g., the “semi-employed,” the “employed unemployed,” “casual workers,” “freelancers,” “trainees,” “bursaries,” and others) with the consequent alteration of the temporalities of work in relation to that of their parents. Political motivation to break away from the *longue durée* of a right-wing dictatorship (1933–1974) and the largely immutable policies of the New State (*Estado Novo*) fostered the desire to embrace shorter and more flexible horizons, leading to what anthropologist Jane Guyer calls “the demise of the near future.”⁸ But what seemed like a strange and realistic combination of reacting against fascism while embracing the emerging capitalist rhythms in the optimistic 1990s would burst almost two decades later into an

⁸ Jane Guyer, “Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical and Punctuated Time,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 3 (2007): 409–421.

overwhelming crisis of life-building and expectations about the future. In the heat of the financial crisis in 2011, the emerging sector of “*déclassé* youth” swelled even more as youngsters with academic credentials were forced to stop their studies due to austerity cuts in their parents’ salaries, or the elimination of scholarships and subsidies, as penance for their parents’ fiscal sins.

All these factors have contributed to the climate of uncertainty experienced today across the generational spectrum in Portuguese society. Yet, for those awaiting the return of Sebastian, uncertainty is not just a consequence, it is also foundational and generative.⁹ While fog appears out of a particular historical conjecture, it does so in an idiom and intensity that is embedded in local tradition as potential, awaiting future reappearances. Indeed, it is because fog is at once cause and consequence that it is both ongoing and passing, that it distends itself in the temporal infinity of a past participle. This gerundial quality of fogginess for the Portuguese emerges from that historical spectre that keeps on renewing itself as that which will come from the future. The spectre is imminent. The spectre is awaited. It haunts the present at once from the past and from the future without ever presenting itself. The fog will not pass because it is the very medium of history that has shaped local conceptions of time and horizon, of anticipation and possibility, of space and atmosphere.

Sebastian is promised to return through the fog in a moment of crisis to rescue the country. But what kind of conceptualization of crisis is at stake here? Moreover, if fog is not momentary but ongoing, if it is not episodic but enduring, how will photography be able to contain it within its temporal register of an instant? How can the limitless quality of its content be captured by the limited framing and instantaneous shutter of the camera?¹⁰ It is because fog itself is the conductive medium through which the photographs in Limbo are taken that they are less about representation than about staging a continuum between medium and message, between means and ends, between background and foreground. In the photos, fog performs the kind of “operational solidarity” that Gilbert Simondon identified between a technical object and an environment to which it opens itself up.¹¹ In that sense, D’Orey’s work is not just bound to a mode of representational

9 On the theme of generative indeterminacy, see Maria José A. de Abreu, “Technological Indeterminacy,” Anthropological Theory 13, no. 3 (2013): 267–284.

10 See, however, Michael Naas’s assessment of Derrida’s work on photography for a striking analogy between the serial nature of photography and the spectre that here goes under the name of Sebastian. As Naas observes, “because every photograph anchors a loss and, in archiving it, keeps it as loss, there would seem to be in photographs at once an imminence of death and a delaying of it, a time, a deferral, a lag between the verdict ‘this too will have to die’ [...] and the carrying out of the verdict.” Michael Naas, “‘Now Smile’: Recent Developments in Jacques Derrida’s Work on Photography,” South Atlantic Quarterly 110, no. 1 (2011): 214.

11 See Gilbert Simondon, On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects, trans. Ninian Mellamphy (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1980 [1958]).

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politics whereupon the message places the viewer in the role of an interpreter or decoder. Rather, her work is performative in the sense that it aligns the eye of the viewer with the *process* of photography-making itself, revealing the political economy of the image. If, as mentioned above, fog is not just a symptom of crisis but the atmosphere attached to a highly political zone of negotiation and decision-making between possibilities and perspectives, then fog is not just a theme of photography. Rather, it is the medium's own performativity. The fog we see enveloping the activist-protagonists in Limbo emanates from the medium of photography itself confronted with a myriad of possible angles. Even as fog is a theme charged with historical and cultural signification, Limbo manages to relay that heritage to the art of photography. In other words, the two fogs—the thematized fog of Sebastian that moves across the image (at once still and in passing), and the fog that emanates from the editorial process of flow and arrest (that Benjamin identified with messianic time¹²)—comingle and wreath. The fog of crisis is, therefore, much more than a condition—whether existential, economic, or political—of the present moment. Rather, fog is the very structure of possibility, of the many paths, cuts, and

12 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

shifts that one can take at the expense of others, even as each choice is always already percolated by otherness.¹³ Rather than a passive understanding, fog thus stages the possibility for action, the very structure behind and through which activism would or *could* be possible: an active proposition—a critique—rather than a passive phenomenon. Rather than happening in context, fog *is* the context. More than occurring in time, fog itself entails a theory of time: messianic time. What then, ultimately, is involved in this reading of D’Orey’s work is a form of relating to the technological medium *as limbo*, which allows us to reassess the notion of crisis *as critique*.

In her recent book Anti-Crisis, anthropologist Janet Roitman proposes to take seriously the task of investing crisis with crisis, that is, to access crisis as a possible unveiling of the conditions involved in the production of crisis itself. As she explains, we often assume crisis is an already pre-constituted category, namely, that which demarcates a period of exception in relation to a shared idea of what regularity is. Countering this idea, Roitman opts to take a step back and ask instead: “What kinds of work does the term crisis allow?” Taking up the work of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, for whom crisis and critique work as two notions etymologically related via the Greek term *krino*, Roitman explores the analytical force of such a pairing. As an object of analysis, crisis becomes a methodology, a mode of engagement, a process of decision-making from among plural possibilities. Crisis is critique because it is intrinsically editorial, an active delving into possibility and latency. As Roitman puts it, “Crisis is an enabling spot for the production of knowledge.”¹⁴ In sum, what makes crisis an “anti-crisis” is the project of thinking crisis despite itself, that is, via the term’s self-occupation of negativity as a means to unveil the underlying, often invisible logic of choice and passage regarding what counts as crisis and what does not. Such an approach to crisis via the negative would imply rendering visible the operational world—*crisis as critique*—behind any image or textual depiction.¹⁵ Seeing a photo is necessarily a *seeing through* the medium. It is in this sense that D’Orey’s Limbo establishes a fascinating contrast with the meticulous realism of the painting “Wondering Above a Sea of Fog,” where fog is used to conceal the manual work of the painter’s brushstrokes. In other words, the fog as message is used to hide the medium of paint.¹⁶ It performs what anthropologist

13 See James D. Faubion, An Anthropology of Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

14 Janet Roitman, Anti-Crisis (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 13.

15 For an anthropological perspective of this idea in relation to digital photography, see Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, “The Politics of Wire Service Photography: Infrastructures of Representation in a Digital Newsroom,” American Ethnologist 39, no. 1 (2012): 71–89.

16 See Joseph Leo Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), and Alena Alexandrova, Dis-continuities: The Role of Religious Motifs in Contemporary Art (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

A. L. Kroeber calls “the subordination of technique to theme.”¹⁷ Ironically, the painting aspired to do what the new mechanical medium of photography promised to, namely, achieve an instance of theomimesis or the acheiropoetic: to have images appear as instantaneous (divine) creations as though there were no medium or human hand involved. In Limbo, by contrast, fog shows in its attempt to conceal. The mechanical traces of the photographs saturate the scenes it gives rise to. The spectral comes forward while looking back.

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¹⁷ A.L. Kroeber, An Anthropologist Looks at History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 63.