

# AFK: reclaiming the holy through art

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## Inscriptions

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Our era is marked by a loss: we live in a time when there is no longer a ready access to the domain of the sacred. This fundamental insight lay at the heart of Friedrich Nietzsche’s approach to modern life; God is dead. It was we, the humans, who murdered God.

Differently, then, did the ancients live.<sup>2</sup> In their naïve interaction with Gods and nature, it was as if the Gods were part of nature itself; there was no immediate distinction between fire and its maker; between thunder and the divinity behind it; or, with a more contemporary twist, between the dancer and the dance.

Does this loss of the divine entail that the Gods can only be brought to presence as memory, as sentimentality and longing? Our question concerns the ways in which we can again be brought into the proximity of an ecstatic relation to being.<sup>3</sup>

What we ask is how we today might escape our everyday illusions, and re-enter into a relation to the world where things stand out as what they really are; this sense of *ekstasis*, to stand out, indicates how, in a state of ecstasy, things stand out, not as illusions, but precisely from *out of* their everyday illusory character, and into their reality. This *festive state* was in ancient Greek times relegated to the temple, the theatre, and the stadium; are these sites that are still made available to the festive?<sup>4</sup>

Our inquiry concerns the role of art and the artist in a culture that seeks to approach being after the death and withdrawal of the Gods. Under this God-less sky it is the task of art to allow beings to appear in their own radiance, and to remove them from the dull and unforgiving horizon of our everyday existence. Thus, it is the task of the poet

and the artist to prepare the ground for such radiant encounters, meetings that allow us to re-enter into a ecstatic relation to being and things.



The distinction between high art and popular culture is often drawn along the lines of the practitioner. Culture for the masses is manufactured by corporate vendors, while truly popular culture is made by the people themselves. This is why we see a growing interest in studies of fan culture in institutional scholarship; after we have realised that film stars and elite football clubs are luxury items on a global

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<sup>2</sup>Admittedly, this is a controversial presumption in Nietzsche and in the philosophy of his pupil, Martin Heidegger. Julian Young notes that while it may be true (or not) that these philosophers *sentimentalise* their contrasting example (making the ancient Greeks figure as some kind of “Arcadian bunch of Greens” (Young 2002, 42f) we should note that their *purpose* in these texts is to provide a contrast to a modern, godless existence. Regardless of whether one finds Heidegger’s linguistic evidence on the true nature of the ancient Greeks convincing, it is possible to hold this figure as exemplary of a *potentiality* that stands in contrast to our own.

<sup>3</sup>Heidegger’s most often quoted thoughts on the ecstatic subject are from his “Letter on Humanism” (2011, 155ff.), where he relies on the etymology of ecstasy to argue that to be ecstatic is to be set *outside* oneself (ek-static). For a further discussion, see Fjeld 2018, 12-14.

<sup>4</sup>Heidegger would argue that poets and artists were the privileged inhabitants of a festive relation to the world, i.e. that they did not depend on particular sites or seasons to be transported into what we might call festivity (Young 2002, 58-59).

market governed by the laws of finance capital, it is still possible to exploit their fan base on the grounds that their followers still believe that celebrities and sports stars are part of a popular project. A truly popular cultural form, then, would require that its executors somehow escapes the logic of mass consumption. Could one instance of popular culture by this definition be taggers, street artists, makes of graffiti, who, at least since the 1980s, have made their mark on our common visual space mostly against the will of the social and legal framework in which they operate?

And yet it is clear that not everyone who acquires a spray can and paints his signature on public and private property is an artist. It is first and foremost the British street artist Banksy that has been able to capture the public imagination, and thus been able to open up for the possibility of a popular practice, street art, becoming part of a recognised art world.

Do street artists *want* this kind of recognition? The answer to this is ambiguous. When Banksy's "Girl with Balloon" was auctioned at Sotheby's for a price in excess of one million pounds, the artist had beforehand devised an apparatus that shredded the artwork at the moment of sale.<sup>5</sup> While certainly an indication of street art's increasing validation as a popular art form the auction at Sotheby's come to represent street artists troubled relation to the established art world in general, and specifically the financialisation of art that has become an appendix to institutionalised high art.

The Norwegian street artist AFK makes specific references to Banksy's "Girl with Balloon" in his work, and in that manner writes himself into a novel tradition of popular artists who want stand to outside the official domain through their anonymity; they do not aspire to the kind of personal recognition we associate with established artists, and neither do they, apparently, seek the kinds of monetary rewards that may be available to a few, highly celebrated practitioners of an art form.

Thus, anonymity. But there's another reason for this self-imposed exile. AFK came into the public view after making a *piece* that took as its theme a highly contentious current topic, the recent debate in immigration in Europe. In line with the tougher mood on immigration in Europe Norway's then-Minister of Immigration, and later Minister of Justice, Sylvi Listhaug, wanted to make new demands: immigrant would have to demonstrate more solid competencies in Norwegian, a good income, and a permanent dwelling before being considered for permanent residence. The ensuing media storm, which included several controversial social media posts made by the Minister of Justice, culminated in Listhaug's withdrawal from government.<sup>6</sup>

In the middle of this controversy AFK's most well-know work to-date appeared on a wall in central Bergen; it was a piece showing Listhaug nailed to a cross, and made up with a crown of thorns. Surrounding her were sets of microphones, as if she were hosting a press conference, and bouquets of flowers, giving the impression that we might be observers at a funeral. Around her waist the words *Mein Kampf* is written. This is a mass-disseminated media event of a particular kind; we see an event where the designations "mob" and "victim" are in a state of flux. Is it the recently departed Minister of Justice who is the reawakened German dictator?<sup>7</sup> Or is it, quite on the contrary, the media that *portrays her* as a villain, thus contributing to her social expulsion? The logo of her political party, FrP (Fremskrittspartiet, the Progress Party), is shown on her right arm, while the thorns on her head are adorned with the logo of the radical socialist party Rødt, which first proposed a vote of no-confidence, thus ushering in the process that culminated in her resignation.

Did the artist show the retiring minister as a victim? Or did he on the contrary illustrate how the one who seeks to crucify other tend to end up on the cross themselves? The sense and meaning of the piece remain open, but what is clear is that the artist did not himself seek to become an object of public attention. His anonymity shielded him from the scathing effects of fame, while also ensuring some protection from the potential liabilities of his particular artistic practice.

AFK had up until this point been known in Bergen mostly for a large piece, "Awakening" (2016), an ultra close-up of the face of a baby waking up, which had been painted on a public wall in a local transport hub. It was after the National Road Authority painted over the piece, leading members of the public and local politicians to ask if this erasure was within the parameters of the Authority's mandate that AFK's work was propelled into local prominence. The debacle generated the question of whether "Awakening" should be considered a kind of artwork protected by our belief in freedom of speech, and by the special status we confer on works of art.

Against this mediated beginning, "Making of a martyr" (2018) seemed to constitute a new turn towards

<sup>5</sup>See Vartanian 2018.

<sup>6</sup>See, e.g., Frøjd et al. 2018.

<sup>7</sup>*Mein Kampf* was the title of the biography of Adolf Hitler, which was largely taken as dictation by a secretary from the then-imprisoned Corporal. Questions such as personal destiny, duty, and national supremacy were keys to Hitler's thought.

current political matters and a distinct, critical voice. When, later in the year, another piece by AFK, depicting the editor of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, in martyr's garb only days after his arrest by British police<sup>8</sup> it was clear that we now saw a shift in the direction of AFK's public pieces: increasingly we were presented with stark, highly mediated images, stylised in a visual language particular to AFK's street art, and with a distinct message.

What makes these recent pieces interesting as works of art, rather than mere political pamphleteering illegally spray painted on private property, is their thematisation of questions that go beyond the immediacy of the cultural moment. Both pieces, "Making of a martyr" and "Assange", demonstrate a turn to social issues, but also toward questions we rather associate with social *philosophy* and, we would suggest, the intersection between such philosophy and *theology*, or, simply social theology.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the piece of Listhaug, but also, to some extent, in the context of "Assange," we are incited to ask not only who is the martyr, and by what means this martyrdom is perpetuated, but also, and more crucially, what it is *in our culture* that sets in motion this apparently repetitive process of expulsion, cleansing, and reconstitution? One way to approach this kind of question is to turn to the philosophy of René Girard, who postulated the *scapegoat* as *the* central figure not just of *our* time, but of our culture *historically constituted*.<sup>10</sup>

In his approach René Girard embarks from the ancient Greek ritual of the *pharmakos*, the event through which a member of the community was expelled or ritually slaughtered as a sacrificial victim to pacify the Gods and the powers beyond those of mere mortals. This brutal, sacred constitution of society was nevertheless so painful for the ancients, according to Girard, that they invented a long series of rituals and founding narratives to cover over their initial slaughter. A key moment in Girard's analysis is when he directly confronts the established interpretation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, itself grounded in an orally circulated, well-established epic that was part of the ancients' common narrative stock. While to Sigmund Freud the play and its founding story demonstrated our universal cultural inclination to patricide, psychic repression, and therapeutic story-telling, Girard saw the *expulsion* of King Oedipus as the primary fact, and the prior events as merely circumstantial, retrospectively added rationalisations of the sacrificial violence committed by the community at their victim's expense. Since this is a universal characteristic of cultures, rituals have served to symbolise this unchanging foundational event, and *Oedipus Rex* constitutes *one* such narrative symbolisation.

However, Girard goes further and sets out a whole theory of the beginnings of this sacrificial logic. His view rests on an interpersonal understanding of human culture that is set in a context of unequal and constantly struggles where members of society seek to gain mastery over others, and where the ultimate reward is constantly dislocated, and thence not ever fully attainable. Desire, for Girard, while first constituted as a subject's articulated *want for* an object, quickly develops into a state where what we desire is no longer any specific object, but simply whichever object it is that resides in the desiring will of our mediated other. This second person is the character we take as a model for our desiring, and our only means to, perhaps neurotically, *get back* at this Other is by way of attempts to *emasculate* the desire of this instance, and thus *ourselves* become the modelling instance.

It is this desire to *become the model* that is constitutive of ritual violence in Girard. What he proposed in the case of *Oedipus Rex* was to approach it more like a whodunnit than as a classical tragedy; by backwards reasoning we can perceive the play as showing a trial of the mob that persecuted King Oedipus, and, by way of violent insurrection, drove him out of his castle and, blinded, into the wilderness. What was it that caused this kind of irrepressible, destructive behaviour on the side of the mob?

It is here that Girard would turn to that ancient ritual, the *pharmakos*. As a generative core of our culture, this sacrificial expulsion of a member of the tribe pointed to our violent origins: through ritual slaughter and banishment the community was cleansed and returned to a potential for regeneration. However, even if it is a king we encounter as the narrative villain in *Oedipus Rex* we cannot be certain that in its originary, cultic moment the role of the exile was assigned to a nobleman; rather, the depiction on the outcast as a member of the royal household would intensify the inevitable, tragic character of the mob's defence speech, and thus strengthen Girard's suspicion that we are witnessing is a cynical,

<sup>8</sup>Assange was detained by the police while he was hiding inside the Ecuadorian embassy, where he had been in voluntary exile for years. Assange was first granted asylum by Ecuador, before it was revoked after a general election and the instalment of a new president less positively inclined to Assange's case. See, e.g., Quist-Arcton 2019.

<sup>9</sup>The most prominent proponent of this turn in theology is Giorgio Agamben, whose widely distributed *Homo Sacer* series cross-cuts between social analyses *alla* Michel Foucault and remarks on belief and Christianity. The first book in this series is translated as *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998 (1995).

<sup>10</sup>As with Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1972/1977) sought the *cultural roots* of a present social phenomenon; while to Freud that phenomenon was the question of patricide and its relation to social repression and ritual, to Girard it was ritual violence as a source of the sacred.

and possibly necessary, element in a cover-up: what is hidden from view is the initial expulsion. In this manner, the story of this primary act of murder serves a dual purpose; first, it seeks to abscond the perpetrators of violence, the mob, from any guilt or responsibility; and, second, it explains the horror in a way that leaves the *community* blameless, thus enabling its members to grieve the victim; in other words, the story and associated artefacts constitute a *totem* around which the community can reconstitute itself, becoming a site for remembrance and regeneration around the shared belief that the initial murder was unavoidable, and attributable to forces quite beyond them. It becomes, in other words, a holy site.

When it comes to the question of how victims are actually selected Girard put forward a highly inventive and evocative theory of *mimetic suggestion*: in it, members of the community look to each other to figure out who it is that holds some kind of *informal* power, and this kind of *aura*<sup>11</sup> is given articulation in phrases such as “there is something *to* that person,” or, “there is a radiance emitting from that person,” which, rephrased in terms of desire, becomes “what is it that this person *has* that people recognise as so *attractive*, and what must I do to acquire this object (and thus, as a consequence, achieve the kind of recognition presently afforded to my model)?” Since simply getting hold of a car, a house, or some other specific object does little to resolve the unequal relation that gave rise to the rivalry (it simply sets into motion a whole race of commodity accumulation), the question sooner or later ushers into the realisation that, in order to quench the model, it is necessary to figure out what it is that this figure *desires* so that it is possible to acquire the object *prior to* our model, putting us in the position of holding the object that our model aspires to.

To take away someone’s desire, its very generative force *as* desire, is of course symbolically to erase them as subjects of language.<sup>12</sup> For this reason we can say that the void generated by the ritual slaughter of an arbitrary victim, selected by way of mimetic suggestion, is made meaningful through the ritual reenactment of this scapegoating procedure. With the images of contemporary cases where we can reasonably pose the question of this kind of expulsion AFK’s “Making of a martyr” and “Assange” open us to the question of such as shared constitutive cultural moment.

Girard suggested that the selection of the scapegoat was arbitrary, i.e., that there would be no intrinsic characteristic to the victim that would explain their selection. Nevertheless, in his analysis of specific cases it is possible to detect some general trajectories that enable the analyst to narrow the field of potential victims. For instance, the scapegoat tends to be someone who is from the outset singled out as precisely the opposite of what turns out to be their destined position; she or he is deemed as a *saviour* of the community, such as Oedipus was when he first reentered Thebes. It is only later, when the “cure” appears not to work, when the plague haunting Thebes doesn’t go away, that the previous saviour is reconfigured as the *harbinger* of all things evil and wrong. Thus, in the case of Oedipus, rather than figuring as the one who had the capacity and power to rescue Thebes from a deadly curse, he turns out to be the one who brought on the curse in the first place. It is this about-face that is typical of the selection process: we can see the emergence of a field of potential candidates that, through a process of *mimetic suggestion* is successively narrowed down until there is one remaining actor, the one who is destined for expulsion.

It is this process of turning that emerges in both AFK’s images. In “Making of a martyr” it is open whether it was the immigrants, first positioned as rejuvenators of their host community, that were subject to an about-face and victimised as perpetrators of all things ill in their new residence; or, obversely, if it was the Minister of Justice, Sylvi Listhaug, who, through her attempt to bring about a cleansing of the community, became a victim when her “cure” failed to heal society, culminating in a vote of no-confidence and her resignation. With “Assange” we seem to have a more straightforward case: the one who opened up a new space for communication and understanding in the global community himself became the perpetrator of innumerable social misdeeds, his expulsion thus becoming the linchpin of a

<sup>11</sup>Note that Benjamin clearly distinguished his definition of “aura” from those who regard this phenomenon as a domain of the *cultic*; to Benjamin the aura of a work of art was a remnant of a bygone era, and therefore largely lost to our present epoch of mechanical reproduction (1969/1935, 217–251). Pierre Bourdieu perceived informal power as a logic of recognition. David Swartz explains that Bourdieu’s *symbolic capital* is a form of “denied capital,” as it “disguises the underlying interested relations as disinterested pursuits. [...] Symbolic capital is a form of power that is not perceived as power, but as legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the service of others” (1997, 90). See also Bourdieu 1986/1983, 241–258.

<sup>12</sup>Jacques Lacan proposed that human beings are in their essence symbolising creatures, and that it is this feature that distinguishes us from other animals. Our entry into the symbolic order is coextensive with the emergence of our desiring being. See, e.g., *Seminar VI*, where he compares human communication to that of the hippopotamus: “You must not think that non-speaking beings, the animals, do not locate things, but they do not do it intentionally with something said, but with traces of traces. We will come back when we have time to the practice of the hippopotamus, we will see what he leaves behind him for his fellows. What man leaves behind him is a signifier, it is a cross, it is a bar, qua barred, qua overlaid by another bar which indicates on the one hand that as such it has been effaced” (1958, 55–56.)

social renewal.

What is clear is that in both cases it is the logic of the mob, rather than some specific act or characteristic of any of the their adversaries, that stands at the centre of AFK's pieces. The images manufactured by mass-media, national politicians, or, simply, the (mis-)conceptions of certain high-profile persons literally inscribed onto their bodies in concert creates the effect of expulsion; we are none the wiser with regard to the apparent subject of these pieces, and yet we get a strong sense of a hidden mechanism that serves as a collective feature.

Thus, it is only when we recall the *holy* character of the *pharmakos* ritual in ancient society that we can begin to understand the sense in which art has the capacity to *open up* and *prepare the ground* for the divine in our midst; is it not, after all, its potentiality as a *sacred* element that the *pharmakos* rouses our interest, our repulsion and fascination, even in our mass-mediated, highly technological epoch? What we have here is something that escapes the technological mode of explanation, giving us pause. What is it that lies at the core of the scapegoating we observe in these pieces?



It is with this question that we finally arrive at the distinction between philosophy and the arts. It would seem a contradiction when Martin Heidegger in no uncertain terms declared that we had reached the *end of philosophy*, and yet inscribed his work in a long and venerable tradition of, precisely, philosophical thought. One way to resolve this, indeed the approach taken by Heidegger himself, was to claim that his path was not characteristic of philosophy *per se*, but, rather, a novel, at least vis-à-vis canonical philosophy, kind of *thought*. However, this might not be the most comprehensive solution.

To uncover Heidegger's approach to philosophy we should begin by delving deeper into his key distinction between *Gestell* and *poiesis*. While the former signifies a resource-oriented approach to the world, a way in which objects are considered *useful* or *usable* to a technological subject<sup>13</sup>, the latter is a term to describe a gentler, more open approach that allows things to come forth as *what they are*.

It is here that Heidegger's contrasting of our contemporary technological epoch (*Gestell*) with an ancient (Greek) world-view comes into its own. Against our relation to objects and nature today as characterised by violent exploitation, Heidegger would posit a more gentle approach that seeks to care for things in themselves, that, in other words, pursue ways that would bring out the *essences* of things.<sup>14</sup> It is this contrasting world-view that Heidegger associates with *poiesis*, as a way to care for things as they show themselves.

It is also here that we find the main distinction between philosophy and the arts, not in their approach to *poiesis*, but in their potentialities to open up for things *as they are*. Rather than a relation between these two domains characterised by *use* and, ultimately, *exploitation* (such as when arts are considered as merely providing *illustrations* or *examples* of more profound and important philosophical points), Heidegger suggests that philosophy and the arts have radically different *potentialities* for disclosure. While philosophy today, we could say, is fundamentally caught up in its relation to other scholastic disciplines, and restricted by their horizons of disclosure typically ordained by technological *Gestell*, the arts do not suffer the same limitation.

To put it differently, while both thinking proper, i.e. non-metaphysical philosophy in Heidegger's sense, and the arts are concerned with non-violently caring-for things *in themselves*, their *concrete ways* of disclosure are differently restricted, and it is in *this* precise sense that philosophy and art can reengage as common ways to care for things so as to allow their thing-ness to stand out, and in this manner to again prepare the ground for the *sacred place* required by a return of the Gods.

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<sup>13</sup>See, e.g., Young 2002, 44-58.

<sup>14</sup>The term *essence* in Heidegger is a highly complex and fluid term, see Young 2002, 51.

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