

## Cannibals of Appropriation: about Asgar/Gabriel's latest works

*"The present production apparatus is, therefore, a gigantic machine for psychic and physical mobilization... On the one hand, ghosts are brought to life, and on the other, the living are left to die."* - The Invisible Committee

*"Après, Ernest, je reprendrai un morceau."*<sup>1</sup> Corinne in *Week-end* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967)

One of the protagonists in *we are hungry, in fact very hungry* (2012) is about to bite into a leg. Her/his mouth is wide open and smeared with blood; she/he is keen on protecting her/his prey by not letting the mob take it from her/him. For the woman in a yellow t-shirt on the right side of the painting, this is much easier. Set aside from the main group she sits in undefined territory – clouds? a stretcher? – pleasurably feeding on a forearm. Severed limbs like the half-eaten forearm are a recurring motif in this new large-format oil painting by Asgar/Gabriel. These recurring limbs have been dislocated from the body as a result of both the depicted events and the process of painting. While in the painting *the living dead* the zombies in the shopping center remain calm, those that are in *we are hungry...* exist in a state of pure chaos: open graves with naked as well as clothed bodies wriggling next, below, and above one another. One group has focused their attention on goods echoing their former existence, while the others are solely fixated on the consumption of their own species. Both types of the undead just want to fill their empty stomachs, and satisfy their primary (and only) need: unrestrained hunger.

Zombies have been associated with the excesses of a capitalist consumer culture, since they are characters without a will of their own; they embody the ultimate consumer who is trained with an insatiable desire for new goods and services. Hardly novel, this equation was formed when genre founder George A. Romero's movie *Dawn of the Dead* was released in 1978. In the second part of the trilogy, human survivors manage to escape from the zombies into a shopping mall. Once inside, they surrender to purely escapist pleasures of consumption, completely ignoring the serious danger of the zombies laying siege upon them. This plot puts humans metaphorically on the same level as the species they defy, a cross-over between "an Other connoted with fear and a repressed desire."<sup>2</sup> Asgar/Gabriel deal precisely with this idea. In *we are hungry...* the living dead are dangerously close to the living in a double sense. Except for their slightly blank stare, their sometimes bad posture, and occasionally a bit of blood at the

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<sup>1</sup> "Well, then I'll have another piece, Ernest."

<sup>2</sup> Volker Pantenburg, "Faim de Cinéma. Jean-Luc Godard: hungrig." In: *Das schlechte Gewissen der Moderne (Modernism's remorse)*, German, edited by Jochen Fritz and Neil Stewart (Köln: Böhlau, 2006), 37. Translated by Claudia Slanar.

corners of their mouth, they look quite human and don't resemble the ugly, tattered creatures from the classic movies anymore.

Next to the panoramic *we are hungry ...* which covers almost two walls of the gallery space, a smaller piece is presented that is painted on cardboard, mounted on metal poles, and leaned against the wall. *Art is anarchy* mixes scenes and characters from Jean-Luc Godard's movie *Week-end* (1967) with others from the Asgar/Gabriel cosmos. Wrecked cars from the movie are piled up into a symmetric composition with naked young men and women ecstatically dancing on the top and throwing blank white flyers in the air. A spaced-out female drummer sits, rather floats on the left while staring upward, and on the right, wooden bars, wrecked cars as well as body-parts bulge out of an undefined background. It looks as if the wooden boat out of Asgar/Gabriel's earlier work *in den hohen Wellen unserer Abenteuer* has run aground. For *Kunst ist Anarchie* the artists borrowed the Grisaille-technique from late medieval painting which was then used to simulate sculpture and its materiality. Here, the black and white of the Grisaille mix with the brown color of the untreated cardboard, reminiscent of an old photograph's sepia tint. The painting seems to radiate a curious light that is achieved by pointedly placing white pigment. Thus Asgar/Gabriel present the depicted moment of revolution as a nostalgic projection or simple fantasy.

The artists quote Godard like they quoted Géricault, Courbet or Goya before. They share – and *Week-end* is paradigmatic for this – a specific interest and constitution regarding their subject as well as production. Both are not interested in social critique through the presentation of opposing binary categories. They assume appropriation, mixing and openness as basic conditions for critique. Like a lot of Asgar/Gabriel's paintings Godard's anti-thriller presents an odyssey but with a very insidious promise of luck. After a car accident the bourgeois couple Corinne and Roland roam around a post-apocalyptic landscape near Paris to get to the imaginary village of Oinville, where Corinne's mother lives. They plan on robbing her and if this doesn't work out, murdering her. On their way they pass burning car wrecks while the corpses of former passengers are literally draped onto the surrounding landscape.<sup>3</sup> These images testify the results of a violent disposition gone viral which breaks out at the smallest occasion. But it is not just the bourgeoisie whose instincts are exposed by this; a rebellious guerilla troupe of young people who live in the woods is even more willing to resort to violence. In strange rituals reminiscent of Viennese Actionism they kill and eat their victims. Yet they wear fashionable Hippie-clothes and in

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<sup>3</sup> In his analysis, Pantenburg mentions the "accurately composed painterly images" depicting these catastrophic scenes in *Week-end*. Pantenburg, "Faim de Cinéma," 32.

between the killings they play a set of drums. Corinne and Roland are eventually taken hostage; Corinne then becomes a member, and in the end consumes her husband.

Media scientist Volker Pantenburg has stressed the complexity of the anthropophagic act as metaphor in Godard's movie which points not only to the political development in the process of decolonialization but also to the insatiable hunger of a consumer society.<sup>4</sup> However, for him the most productive reading is to see the "swallowing," the literal incorporation as signs for amalgamation and cross-contamination, ideas also central to Godard's aesthetic.<sup>5</sup> This is a parallel to Asgar/Gabriel's work which goes beyond mere quoting. Openness and permeability with regards to the boundaries of genres, themes, metaphors and chronologies have always been characteristic of their work as well as the incorporation of pieces of art history, quoting and sampling. Only now, the interlocking between their pieces has become more and more pronounced. For example there is a "banner"<sup>6</sup> which looks like a sketch for the "original" of *Kunst ist Anarchie* but has been produced much later. There is a small coffin on display resembling the model for the painted ones, or is it the other way around? Through this method Asgar/Gabriel are able to develop ideas and subjects which leave their work incomplete and open. This same logic is applied to the materials. For the first time within their body of work they leave parts of the canvas untreated and visible which serve as references to the constituent factors of painting itself: process and technique. The becoming-image of the reception and the simultaneous production are two inseparable parts of a process: that of blending, appropriation and incorporation. Their new "landscape paintings (e.g. *through the water and anderswo*)" show an increased abstraction that is fully accomplished in the panel *raft*. Stylistic clichés like graffiti-style color stains and the blurry application of paint which makes space two-dimensional, are complemented by strokes of black paint emulating the abstract gestures of post-war modernism. Already implied in the use of a compound name, Asgar/Gabriel are not interested in the authentic gesture of the artist. Rather, they confront us with an exuberant abundance of signs by interrelating everything, yet still leave the work open. They show us a dense mélange of codes, images, and media that surrounds our everyday and defines how we perceive this reality (even though it might be a construct). At the same time they postulate that all this is *just not* "right", not what it seems, but staged, all theater and performance. Each figure that might seem

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<sup>4</sup> Pantenburg, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> My use of quotes here points to the instability of categories, concepts and strict borders in Asgar/Gabriel's work. The depicted scenes are just signs on canvas which only mean something obvious on first glance. Consequently, in *raft* (2012) these signs have become abstract and indecipherable entering a different regime of references.

stereotypical at first glance is absorbed and ruptured in their cannibalistic mode of appropriation. Their painted ghosts are not frightening but reminders that before Michael Myers, Freddy Kruger and co. appeared on screen, sheets were sufficiently scary. And that the real terror is located somewhere else, as George A. Romero put it, “The biggest monsters are our neighbors. The scariest horror is always happening next door.”<sup>7</sup> This relates the zombie-motif to another element of *we are hungry, in fact very hungry*: the fragmentary text. For zombies also represent the result of a capitalist mode of production that exploits people physically and psychologically by putting their “soul at work.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time they signify – as in Godard’s movie – a suppressed desire: the desire to not refine oneself incessantly and not to remain healthy and productive. But even this wish is presented by Asgar/Gabriel as constructed, as the unreachable island of Utopia with its fake palm trees. The relationship between exploiter and exploited, between trained and free subject is more complex, boundaries are more fluid, and utopia has already incorporated dystopia a while ago.

*Claudia Slanar*

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<sup>7</sup> Romero in a Spiegel-interview of August 5, 2005, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/interview-mit-george-a-romero-zombies-sind-wie-wir-a-368223.html>, retrieved on November 27, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Italian media theoretician Franco “Bifo” Berardi describes this development from “post-Fordism to-as he calls it– Semiocapitalism that has succeeded in subjecting all areas of life to the capitalist paradigm of productivity and growth in his book *The Soul at Work* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).