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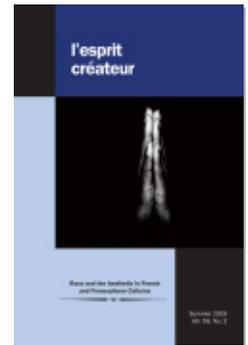
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Desire-work in Sylvain George's *Paris est une fête*

Jiewon Baek

PARIS EST UNE FÊTE is not a film about race. Shot between November 2015 and November 2016 and released in April 2017, Sylvain George's film presents an ironic portrait of the events in the wake of France's recent tragedies, a portrait mixed with images of migrants, the homeless, deceased immigrant youth, rioters at Nuit Debout, and protestors against a prolonged state of emergency. The fast-moving and boisterous montage of the film's opening shots plunges the spectator into the festivity of neoliberal consumption during Christmastime, a fiction of insatiable need set against the background of political and economic anxiety. The first seventy-five frenzied seconds of the film, packed with electronic billboards, fluorescent string lights, flickering ornaments, dancing Santa mannequins, honking rubber toys, and crowds of bodies, all set against a raucous soundtrack, culminate in a closeup of a Darth Vader poster bearing the text "your empire needs you." Desire is everywhere, constantly renewed by lack and channeled into commodity. The film is not about race but about consumerist desire in a state of emergency, or so it appears from the opening.

That the flurry of images pauses at "your empire needs you" renders the message clear: what the empire needs is the consumer who remains fully exposed, who has nothing to hide from the hypervisibility demanded by security measures in a state of emergency. Military police are seen roaming among visitors at the Champs Élysées Christmas market. The orderliness of the carnival maintains the empire's subjects within its borders of representability. The film thus places me, its viewer, within those borders. All the holiday trinkets, fluorescent lights, and flashy billboards supposedly symbolize my wants; however, they never fully satisfy and so I keep consuming, searching for meaningful recuperation. What I lack exactly is undefinable; it falls outside the borders of the orderly spectacle of desire. The unnamable target that renders my desire insatiable circumscribes the *I-you, us-them* relation that drives the 24/7 surveillance state, wars against terrorism, and talks on migration and immigration. The other figure that falls outside the borders thereby justifies the governance of the everyday life of desirous subjects. In the continual search for the objects that correspond to the needs of my desire, for the symbols that fit the framework of my visual interpretation, the unnamable other escaping this correspondence is given a name, and that is the racially other. A film that is not about race thus brings into

question the relationship between the representation of my desire and the racialization of others.

How then do I view—consume—the sensory feast of *Paris est une fête*? The following analysis of the film presents a critique of the structure of desire as expressed in Jacques Lacan’s theory of the symbolic. Desire that is rooted in lack is central to Lacan’s Freudian reading of how the subject relates to and perceives the world symbolically, that is, through language. Severed from the Otherness that language fails to represent, or what Lacan calls the real, the subject views and experiences the world as structured by a primordial lack. The cultural and the historical implications of this model, specifically as regards racialized views of others, constitute a critical blind spot in Lacan’s work. In my study of George’s film, I emphasize the way Achille Mbembe has linked Lacan’s model of the symbolic and the real to discourses on race. Mbembe has pointed out that racism feeds off of the fantasy of *la jouissance perdue*, or the idea that I have been deprived of something inexplicable—the real—that I cannot attain; the root of racism in late-capitalist society is “la difficulté de jouir.”¹ As long as my view of the racialized other suffers from a preexisting lack that I seek to fulfill, it is a self-oriented and self-revolving view that obscures how the racialized other ruptures my framework of subjectivity.

The aesthetic of desire in *Paris est une fête* is unlike the structure of desire that is rooted in lack. The film’s themes and formal aesthetic displace the structure of what I, the viewer, grasp as meaningful or not, based on what I lack. The film’s sensory feast creates an aesthetic of desire detached from lack, contrary to the carnival of desire bound by lack and that perpetuates the embitterment of lives in the feast of global capitalism marked by one ‘crisis’ after another.

The attempt to conceptualize theoretically such an aesthetic exposes the gaps in French theory when it comes to discourses on the racialized other. As Lia Brozgal’s intervention in this special issue pinpoints, there is an elision in critical theoretical approaches in French film studies when it comes to analyzing representations of race. My study of *Paris est une fête* begins to address this problem by explicitly identifying the theoretical lacuna as a matter of symbolic representation. In other words, the elision in the theoretical dichotomy between representability and unrepresentability mirrors the gap in Lacan’s symbolic structure of the subject. The cinema offers a starting point that is different from this theoretical and symbolic gap.

I will suggest an alternative experience of desire by showing how *Paris est une fête* elicits an aesthetic mode of reflection on race that is not inscribed by the absence in the subject’s linguistic structure. To draw this distinction

between the film's aesthetic of desire and Lacan's linguistic structure of desire, Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the figural in *Discours, figure* is helpful. The figural, which Lyotard describes as a visual and sensory force that acts upon language, expels modes of reading and rational comprehension. The figural aesthetic pushes against the viewer's desire to 'read' the film through linguistic mediation that is prone to racializing the other as unrepresentable. Viewing George's film alongside an elaboration of Lyotard's notion of the figural will foreground how the aesthetic mode offers an alternative theoretical means to discuss race in French film studies. The theoretical gaps concerning race in Lacan's and Lyotard's philosophies render all the more appealing the study of George's film alongside these philosophies, because it shows the mutual implication of theoretical and aesthetic modes of reflection on race in view of current political preoccupations as seen in the opening scene of *Paris est une fête*.

Dizzying constellations

Only recently have critics given due attention to Sylvain George's cinematic œuvre, which spans more than a decade.² The breadth of his corpus covers feature films, film shorts, essays, and poetry collections. These are products of time spent in the company of migrants in Calais and Paris, of traveling between urban centers and peripheries, and of his presence at riots and demonstrations in the popular squares of Madrid and Paris. *Paris est une fête* follows similar trajectories that appear in the feature films *Impossible* (2009), *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* (2010), *Les éclats* (2011), and *Vers Madrid* (2014).

As a relatively rapid production compared with that of his previous films which spanned several years, *Paris est une fête* communicates a sense of immediacy that is reflected both in its themes of revolt and in its poetic and undulating style. Through the passing and overlapping of the eighteen "waves" that structure the film's scenes, the sounds, bodies, objects, and texts undergo continual shifts, intensifying the dialectical force in the contact between disparate spatial and temporal dyads: the local and the global, the living and the non-living, the history of slavery and the realities of postcolonial migration, the city-center and the outskirts, the civilian and the police. Stylistically resonant with early twentieth-century representations of space such as Alberto Cavalcanti's shots of Paris, Paul Strand's shots of New York City, Jean Epstein's Breton coasts or Jean Vigo's Nice, the experimental qualities of George's films exhibit interest in a cartography of transversal forms and correspondences.³ Materials from George's past trips to Calais since 2009 reappear alongside images of Paris in 2016. Black and white images conjure

history and the archive, while also evoking the insurgence of nighttime activity as in the name of the production company, Noir Production. The film's style and form are furthermore reflected in the process of editing images shot in digital video color into black and white and combining sound recorded with external and internal microphones. Such technical layering mirrors the aesthetic effect of waves that wash over the boundaries that demarcate the thematic dyads listed above.

The full title of the film, *Paris est une fête: Un film en 18 vagues*, does not appear until the close of the film, at which point the spectator is moved to reflect back on the immediate past experience of having sensed the movement of the waves. Like the titles of George's other films that appropriate literary lines from Michaux or Rimbaud, *Paris est une fête* invokes the French translation of Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. This borrowing recalls the book-title-turned-slogan that popularly circulated in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in 2015, as part of a city-funded campaign to recover the image of Paris and to show her cultural and economic resistance. The irony here, however, is that the film's vast tableau of current affairs contradicts the picture of such a feast. Moreover, the "waves" of images ironically recall descriptions of migrants or persons of "irregular" status in terms of "waves" or "swarms."⁴

The political rhetoric regarding migrants and persons of irregular status is familiar: *me* versus *other*, *us* versus *them*. Cornélius Castoriadis, whom George cites in an interview, defines racism in this way: "Il n'y a que moi qui vaut. Mais je ne peux valoir en tant que moi que si les autres, en tant qu'eux, ne valent rien."⁵ I occupy a place of worth, while the value of others is deemed empty. This fictional narrative is symptomatic of the Lacanian subject who views itself as severed from that which language fails to represent.⁶ My subjectivity is split from the missing signifier—the inassimilable excess I cannot signify. As the *je* fails to signify the place of satisfaction of the desired object, my lack in being (*manque-à-être*) is projected onto the lack of the other, who then becomes a scapegoat for my broken self, forever estranged from the missing object of *jouissance* (Lacan, *Écrits* 126–27). Racializing discourse builds on a fictional structure of the *je* that revolves around a desire that cannot be satisfied. The fictional schema that founds discursive oppositions is rooted in a guilty conscience—*la jouissance perdue*—always in the first person. The projection of the other as a signifier of lack structures the relation that *I* have with, and the need that *I* have for, a racialized, foreign *other*.

The limits of this fiction are exposed by a figure in the film whose trajectories surface throughout the cinematic moveable feast. The overall structure of the film forms two constellations, each of which presents an encounter with

Mohamed Camara, an “irregular” migrant whose state-administered bone test results did not qualify him as a *mineur isolé étranger* (MIE) eligible to receive benefits. The first constellation, as already mentioned above, reveals the luminous glamor of the Champs Élysées as Paris’s tourist hotspot, followed by images of migrants and the homeless in the same city, then followed by an encounter with Mohamed. The second constellation presents the luminous glamour of New York City and its tourist hotspot, the Charging Bull of Wall Street, which is followed by images of migrants at Place de la République in Paris and then another encounter with Mohamed. Intercalated between and after each of these large “waves” are scenes of political demonstrations and memorial sites commemorating victims of attacks. In this moveable feast, the relations between the regular and the irregular or the center and the periphery become sensible to the spectator not as discrepancies but as reflections. The abundance of lights in the film establishes reflections between otherwise unconnected elements: holiday lights in the shape of *joyeuses fêtes*, the moonlight reflecting off the mattress of the homeless, illuminated advertisements, the Grande Roue lit up at night, the glow of lit cigarettes, the stadium lights behind the memorial at the Collège Robert Doisneau for Bouna Traore and Zyed Benna—two youths who died electrocuted while running from a police chase—and New York City’s Chrysler building lit up at night.

The luminous and noisy glamour of Paris at Christmastime quiets down as the opening scene comes to the sight of people walking past a woman and a child, seated on a blanket on the ground against a Kenzo storefront, and then stops at the sight of the French flag flying in the wind, its blue, white, and red reflected in color on the façade of the Madeleine church. The next shot switches back to grayscale, and the luminosity of the *fêtes* is faintly detectable in the form of holiday lights that inscribe the words *joyeuses fêtes* across the sky, far in the distance behind the brick-lined square underneath an elevated railway. The homeless *sans domicile fixe*, acronymically known as the SDF, who have made their beds in this public square, harken back to that other place of the Champs Élysées. The fireworks, squeaking rubber toys, and the creaking Grande Roue have all but drowned out the background noise in this square and also on the esplanade at Aubervilliers where migrants congregate around blankets and mattresses. A *glaneuse* goes through a pile of clothes and rubbish including a newspaper with headlines about tourism and the hotel business, with the Apple App Store and Google Play icons on the bottom of the page; an SDF sleeps next to a duffel bag imprinted with the Adidas logo; and another SDF makes his bed next to a box of “Nesquik Go!” and an SNCF plaque.

As viewer, I read these letters and recognize the icons through the discursive mode. Yet, I am left with a feeling that my attempt at reading the image quickly falls flat before the realities of those who occupy a time and a place visibly co-present with—yet unmatched by—the symbolic colors of the blue, white, and red flag. The themes evoked in these opening sequences expose the shortcomings of the attempt to interpret them with terms, symbolic colors, concepts or frameworks that would patch the gaps of racial and economic inequality. A desire to pay closer attention is coupled with anxiety, for I desire without knowing what mode of viewing I should employ to view the film carefully. This desire, which the film shows in an aesthetic sense that escapes symbolic grasp, lingers as something incongruous with a desire structured by the social and economic fallouts of neoliberal civilization.

A time and a place without me

Before I can cognitively classify the incongruity in these desires, the juxtaposition of tourists and *festivalliers* at the Champs Élysées with the homeless under the railway and with the migrants at Aubervilliers leads into the subsequent wave. The scene begins with a different bed and a different reflection of the festive lights. As viewer, I am brought into the scene of silence, with close-ups of a paper plate and a fork, then an establishing shot of a makeshift bed. The camera gives an extreme long shot of the back of a man sitting on the edge of a canal, before it moves closer to the figure. As my visual judgment dismisses the paper plate and fork as a discardable shot, I am brought into a scene. The mattress on the ground is the locus of the *mise-en-scène* of a desire disengaged from the consumerist lack that is inscribed in commercial icons or disposable utensils. These objects preceding the two establishing shots of the bed and of the man's back are presented before me, in a moment *before* I, the viewer, find myself concerned by what is presented *in front of* me.

The scene is during nighttime, and lights from the buildings along the canal reflect off the water. While the camera presents surroundings too dark to make out, suddenly a hand enters into the frame from the right edge. The camera pans the movement of the hand, as the hand motions across the length of the canal from the left to the right (Figure 1). It presents the spectator with a certain space that has been inhabited. The inhabitant occupies a time and a place without me. He spreads out a sheet over his mattress, then sits and begins to eat from a can of food, while the sound of his voice in voiceover plunges the viewer into a story from an unknown past. The voiceover speaks from an historical time unsynchronized with the moving lips that I see through the camera at eye level with Mohamed, perched on the side of the canal in



FIGURE 1. Canal. Sylvain George, *Paris est une fête* (2016), France. Noir Production.

Paris. The voiceover recounts when Mohamed traveled from Guinea, to Mali, and to Burkina Faso. The moving lips and the voiceover coincide by the time the narrative charts the journey from Burkina Faso to Morocco and to Spain, where he spent time studying before saving up money to come to France. He explains that Spanish was hard because he learned French in his country, since it was colonized by France.

Through the sudden emergence of Mohamed's gesture to unveil the space he inhabits, through the process of setting up the bed, through the monologue he delivers, and the nighttime exercise routine he follows, a certain aesthetic plays out that Sylvain George calls a "jeu vertigineux des perspectives" (Schefer). The presence of the migrant and the bed he has constructed on the edge of the canal do not simply conjure up oppositions between the dominating and the dominated in the recollection of colonial history. If, for Lyotard, experimental cinema functions as a mirror of the desires that organize the collective social body,⁷ the aesthetics of *Paris est une fête* is powerful in the way it directs a desire distinct from my projection of the other as unsignifiable and

unassimilable. In my projection, I attempt to decipher Mohamed's sustained monologue via my imposition and recovery of meaning, but this attempt is frustrated by moments of asynchrony and by Mohamed's own techniques to set up his space and to narrate his account. The camera's manner of presenting the times and spaces that Mohamed occupies, traces of which are visible and invisible (or audible and inaudible) to the viewer, acts against the projection of otherness from my perspectival position.

His is a composite account—a “*jeu vertigineux*”—that brings to the surface the time of his travels, the time of colonial history, the time left behind by the discarded paper plate and fork, the time of his being filmed by George, and the time and place of the spectator's viewing. The *mise-en-scène* thus creates a desirous sense that does not originate from me as a subject driven by the unfulfilled need to represent the other in satisfactory terms. Emmanuel Levinas describes this desirous sense as “*une recherche qui n'est pas aiguillonnée par le manque du besoin ni par le souvenir d'un bien perdu.*”⁸ By contrast, a framework of lack drives Lacan's structure of the subject, wherein the other remains a function of my representation involving a missing signifier that assumes the position of the other as unrepresentable. The aesthetic of desire that Levinas expresses, on the other hand, displaces my relation to the other from an economy of restitution or fulfillment of need.

The limits to Lacan's structure of the subject are concretely manifest in racial representation as the perpetuation of the irreconcilability between the *I* and the *other*. The need to work through the impasse of the discursive representation of the other rejoins the need to rethink the dominant framework of desire in Lacan's psychoanalytic tradition—a tradition that inscribes desire within the bounds of language. If the subject's first experience of reality according to Lacan is the primordial deprivation left by the exclusion of the other from my signifying structure,⁹ the aesthetic experience of viewing George's film displaces the fictional belief that I have been deprived of something that would guarantee my joy or my freedom. Instead of my fictional structure that excludes the other, it is the other that enacts a creative force upon my representation, “*au-delà des calculs et des réciprocités de l'économie et du monde.*”¹⁰

This creative force is what Lyotard calls *la puissance figurale*. In the film, this energy is heightened by the shadowy movement, brilliance, saturation, and plasticity of black and white images. The figural aesthetic stops the eye with a sensory intensity. As soon as I approach the sensory through the tools of language, I have missed its figural force.¹¹ When Mohamed speaks in terms that can be comprehended and transcribed in subtitles, his discourse communicates norms and needs such as making money or pursuing an education.

However, the plasticity and opacity of nocturnal movements in black and white slow the eye down, preventing it from projecting representations in blue, white, and red. Desire created in the figural encounter does not project Mohamed as the unrecognizable other that my language and visual representation fail to account for, because the figural force and vertiginous play decenter the *I* who sees the *other* as trapped in a web of signs and codes at my disposal. Figural energy overwhelms preexisting constructions that lead to the racial exclusion of otherness.

Pulled in and pushed out, my attention is stretched and my senses are morphed by figural movement. Mohamed occupies a time and a place unconcerned by my place in the world; yet he shows with his hand and beckons with his speech. A hand unexpectedly pierces the frame to reveal a space; I hear a voice though it does not match what my eyes see. The manual motion in silence, the shadowy movements, and the voiceover that is out of sync with the image at once pull me in and push me out, because the figural and the discursive emerge from within each other. The figural does not obliterate discursive comprehension, for Mohamed narrates a chronological account of his education, work experience, and his voyage en route to France. The attempt to dismiss the other as unrecognizable is frustrated, and that frustration involves a mode that requires the work of relating to the other. As in Lyotard's writing and in George's film, the imbrication of discourse and figure, one folded within the other, requires work on the part of the viewer.

This desire-work is the work that occurs in the difference between the figural and the discursive, in the difference that unhinges desire from its revolving around an unrecognizable other. It is helpful to theorize the desire-work in *Paris est une fête* because attending to the figural demands creative work, for "une orientation qui va librement du Même à l'Autre, est Œuvre" (Levinas, *Humanisme* 43). Freely: the work of orientation moves towards a desire that is freed from the lacking signifier. Through this desire-work, associations transpire that symbolic representation would suspend.

For example, in the next instance in which Mohamed appears on screen, he enters a place deeply inscribed and memorialized in France's national identity. Here the viewer encounters visual references to immigrant youth victims, terrorist attack victims, political demonstrators, and refugees. Mohamed's presence appears in a scene that is inserted in between a visit to the memorial plaque at the Collège Robert Doisneau for Bouna Traore and Zyed Benna, and an appearance of the CRS police at the sight of rioting crowds. Within this interstitial scene, Mohamed's face appears as a closeup among a series of closeups of various objects scattered around a memorial site: letters, wreaths,

candles, flowers, a pietà picture, and photos of victims' faces. It is only after Mohamed's head is seen tilting in an upward direction that the camera also tilts up along a statue, and stops at the silhouette of Marianne at the apex of the monument of the Republic.

The way that the camera presents the scene, the context is not immediately given. That this is the memorial site at Place de la République in the aftermath of the November 2015 attacks is information gathered only after the viewer has pieced together the details around the timing of the film's shooting. By the time the viewer might draw possible connections and implications involving Mohamed and the monument of the Republic—including the question of who is present there at a national memorial—the end of the scene has already moved on to the opening of the next scene with sounds of gunshots, breaking glass, people's cries, and the image of a line of CRS police behind shields. The closeup of Mohamed amongst closeups of memorial objects and of other visitors with unnamed origins, nationalities, and backgrounds again creates a vertiginous play of perspectives.

The question of who is there at the sight of a national memorial thus takes a different turn. *Who* is there standing under the Marianne and looking down at the various objects at her feet? *Why* is that person there? These are questions that arise out of my desire to fill a gap in my symbolic order. The question "who is there?" has prime relevance for an *I* who relates to the *other*, having defined this other from my perspective. This self-proclaimed relevance by and large amounted to the narrative of "Je suis Charlie" that spilled over the same Place de la République that same year, a narrative that capitalized on the resounding relevance of anyone and everyone who uttered "Je suis Charlie." Whereas this latter phenomenon resulted in the flattening of any and all perspectives such that Charlie could be anyone and no one, the vertiginous play of perspectives created in the above-mentioned scenes effects a decentering of positions built upon the question of who is there. The latter question perpetuates a dominant-and-dominated framework of thinking that keeps othering the other. Mohamed's presence at Place de la République—before I identify the place as such—brings me into an encounter that does not presuppose a set answer to the question of who is there. Will I, the viewer, try to make sense of what I am seeing within the framework of my language, or will I move freely towards the other?

The "conniving" work of desire

Because the camera does not shy away from images laden with recognizable symbols of the discursive order, such as the memorial at the foot at Marianne,



FIGURE 2. Entracte. Sylvain George, *Paris est une fête* (2016), France. Noir Production.

the desire-work transpires in the difference between the figural and the discursive. The offices of Wall Street English, for example, provide a backdrop to the demonstrations for refugees at Place de la République. The allusion to the mega emblem of literacy in global capitalism resurfaces in the sequence in New York City's Wall Street, before it makes full circle to Place de la République, where the office sign is again visible during the destruction of migrant settlements in the public square. Where migrant tents are set up around the square, tattered shopping bags from Galeries Lafayette, Fnac, and Franprix are scattered on the ground. In another symbolic instance, Mohamed meanders through the city's outskirts at night before spreading out his metallic sheet next to a fence, on which a sign is posted: "danger de mort / haute tension 750 volts." Mohamed's presence evinces a connection to Zyed and Bouna that all the while resists scrutiny. He sits and peels and eats a clementine while the camera zooms in on the signage of the shopping mall at Aubervilliers: Millénaire.

In the next instant, after a black screen interrupts the stream of signage, a closeup of two hands in prayer form introduces a magnificent choreography in this *entracte* marking the middle of the film (Figure 2). Against a silent soundtrack, I see, feel, and 'hear' the shapes and movements of punches, pulsating beats, sharp jabs, and waves—visual pulsations created by a dance of



FIGURE 3. Dance. Sylvain George, *Paris est une fête* (2016), France. Noir Production.

hands (Figure 3). The spectating eye can neither stay open long enough nor blink fast enough to keep up with the visual contact, as the rhythmic movements of Mohamed's hands beat intermittently against a black screen. With each pulsating beat emerges a closeup of gestures that are arrested, in a "disposition dont on les croyait incapables."¹² The beat of dancing hands creates figural arrest: motions that speed up or slow down at unpredictable strokes and dispositions halt the spectating eye with sensory overflow. In the hiatus of the figural arrest or *stasis*, the "geste séditieux" produces a "sédition du sensible" (Lyotard, *Flora* 18), which shocks and agitates the temporal transitions that the black screen conventionally signals the viewer to follow. The pulsations push my desire to work beyond what my ears can hear and beyond what my visual 'touch' can palpate.

This beyond is not to be relegated to the realm of the unrepresentable, as if figural excess had no bearing on the viewer's interpretation, which is not the case. The figural sedition of Mohamed's performance awakens my visual interpretation, and the sensory overflow acts upon my desire to draw links between symbolic references. Figural sedition is hence not without its rippling effect in the associations it creates. For example, the subsequent shot shows waves on a body of water in a manner that reflects the wavelike motions of Mohamed's hands. In the next shot, a blinking iris breaks apart the movement

of the camera as it meanders through a sandy area with large rocks. Then appears a still shot of a large fish's head, a series of closeups of the fish from different angles, and then a closeup of a different fish. A deep-focus establishing shot, with the two fish still frozen at the top of steps leading down into Paris's metro undergrounds, ends this series of dead fish with loud and disturbing music.

The *mise-en-scène* makes the 'crisis' clear: underneath the luminous glamor of the global capital, the city's masses are transported through the tunnels in trains that arrive at intervals of most often four minutes or less, trains already crammed with people about to spill out the doors, trains unable to take in more bodies from across the seas. The masses are largely *unconcerned* by these bodies, if not for certain photographs of victims washed up on the shore that arouse collective pathos. The ocean waves, the sandy seashore, the dead fish—these loud allusions to the migrant 'crisis' are interposed between two silent moments: Mohamed's manual kineticism, as discussed above, and a series of frontal closeups of Mohamed as he smokes a cigarette. His exhaling the smoke little by little, with his chin tilted up towards the sky, visually resembles the opening and closing motion of the mouth of a breathing fish. In the silent pulsation, the figural aesthetic attracts my vision towards an otherness that is not pre-inscribed as a gap in my symbolic structure.

The creative *œuvre* of Mohamed's choreography agitates the framework separating my discursive understanding from what lies outside of it. Whereas Mohamed's figural gestures are independent of whether or not my sight and my language can make sense of his performance, the seditious moments call upon and work *with* existing significations. The figural is at work within the montage of images of the Millénaire in Aubervilliers, of Wall Street English, the SDF, Zyed and Bouna, the waves, the rocks, and the fish—images that speak of the neoliberal global market, of precarious lives on the outskirts, and precarious lives that traverse the waters. What lies outside the realm of my concern enacts a force upon my discursive fantasy of the missing object, a fantasy wherein the other remains unrepresentable vis-à-vis my lack. What was inoperable in the discursive fantasy hence *comes into operation* as visual and sonic materials act upon recognizable motifs.¹³

This operation is what Lyotard calls the "connivance" of the figural and the discursive. Cinema puts into play a sense of proximity to and a desire for something that saturates vision, hearing, and touch. In the process there emerges a certain technique that draws links and oppositions. The Place de la République is perhaps the most notable case of how the desire-work operates through connivance. The years of insurrectionary events in Paris are engraved

around the circumference of the statue at Marianne's feet: 1789, 1848, 1871, 1968. The pavement of the public square is where the city's homeless sleep, where traces of Mohamed's ambulations are visible, and where young protesters at *Nuit Debout* reinvoked the '68 slogan, shouting "sous les pavés" in 2016. The brilliance of the illuminated streets around the square during winter festivities returns in the springtime in the shape of fires and explosions set off by figures in revolt against neoliberal precariousness.

Mohamed's time and place

The scene with the dead fish that Mohamed introduced with his gestural performance ends with a shot punctuated by his voiceover. Superposed onto the frontal closeup shot of Mohamed's tilted head as he exhales his cigarette smoke like a breathing fish, the voiceover states rhetorically, "Je ne voyage plus. Pourquoi le voyage m'intéresserait-il?" I continue to hear Mohamed's voice as he describes the civilization of New Yorkers and the Chinese with their grand skyscrapers and pagodas.¹⁴ The image switches to a series of illuminated advertisements that cover the walls of a metropolis: "Jiangsu / A wonderful experience in beautiful China"; "Enjoy," "discover," "connect"; Turkish Airlines; ads for beautiful watches; an ad for scientology; "We have the power to share."

The glittering façade of insatiable desire visually transports the viewer to the luminescence of New York City at nighttime, marking the entry into the second half of the film, while Mohamed's presence is still sensed from a distance by way of his voiceover. The constellation composed by the second half of the film thus superimposes itself onto the first half, as New York City's Wall Street folds onto Paris's Champs Élysées and the waves return to the Place de la République, washing back over sites of angry protestors and of migrants.

Mohamed's voiceover is disconnected from the flurry of dazzling visual stimuli, marking the gulf between the 'voyage' of an undocumented migrant chased by the police—as signaled by the sound of loud sirens against the stream of advertisements—and the 'voyage' of the empowered jet-setter that the ads nurture. Mohamed occupies the place of neither kind of voyager in this constellation of heterogeneous sights and sounds. Nor does he occupy the gap.

The film's motifs of light and shadow may easily lend to a reading that culminates in a dialectic recuperation of the triumph of figures in the shadows. But *Paris est une fête* creates a sense of suspicion against an all-too-easy reading: a burst of energy that erupts at night in a redemptive effort—is this all that Mohamed animates? Might the triumphalization of the marginal serve only to perpetuate a need for the marginal, as that 'sovereign' figure of the

other who slips through the cracks in the geographic contours of global capitalism drawn around *my* desirous lack? A redemptive reading feeds my perception of the other as a sterile difference.

Desire-work does not simply agitate existing perspectives but undergoes a movement elicited by that to which I am not predisposed. The difficulty is that in the end, the 'hero' of *Paris est une fête* might only be described in words as "Mohammed le Guinéen," whose "black hands" create a spectacular performance.¹⁵ But what I see exceeds the qualifier "Guinéen"; the choreography exceeds the description "black hands." Desire is frustrated in the entanglement of discourse and figure. There is something figural that clashes with the limits of language, something that is not contained in linguistic expressions such as "Mohammed le Guinéen."

The figurality of desire seems to escape even the fleshly materiality of Mbembe's vivid words: "Tous les corps sont gris ocre et obscurs. Et c'est ce qui fait d'eux des corps vivants et humains, et à ce titre poreux, ouverts sur ce qui les fait vivre, sur la chair du monde" (Mbembe). The enigma of desire-work is that figurality seeps through the porousness of gray and obscure bodies. Following Lyotard, I would argue that the figural violently and flagrantly works in and through the very process of language and dialogue. *Paris est une fête* does not choose between the figural aesthetic and the representational aesthetic. Figural sensibility cuts through symbolic images and promotes the need to critique how certain concepts are presented and represented in cinema.

Desire-work puts a strain on discourses on race; it is in and through these discourses that the aesthetic of desire moves toward what is elided in the insufficiencies of these very discourses, in the inadequacy and violence done by seeing the other as a racially different other. Inadequacy becomes sensible in what was expressed through the very encounter made possible by language, yet a language "au bord de sa rupture" (Lyotard, *Discours* 384). The figurality of *Paris est une fête* leads me to see existences and modalities of life that I did not see or neglected to see before, because my fictional subjectivity had marked the other as such: unfamiliar, strange, invisible, and unknown. The limits of racializing discourse are circumscribed by a deficiency that keeps my fictional subjectivity going. From my perspective, the other can never be assimilated because my desire can never be satiated. The push to break out of such a limited framework is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of cinema's aesthetic creativity.

Conclusion: the sleepless work of desire

Is it up to me, then, to muster up desire-work? Whence does the effort originate? *Paris est une fête* elicits a desire without intentionality: "Veille sans

intentionnalité mais seulement réveillée sans cesse de son état même de veille.”¹⁶ Unlike the dream-work’s nocturnal mise-en-scène of the subject’s unconscious fantasy, the nighttime activity that unfolds in *Paris est une fête* is indicative of the desire-work that keeps watch, yet remains disengaged from what concerns me. This aesthetic vigil “keeps wake,” as Levinas writes, as I am awakened even from my own state of wakefulness, in a sleepless desire for that which does not depend on the extent of my vigilance or aim.¹⁷

A sleepless desire calls for *work*, turning my attention towards what resists moral and aesthetic resolution in the dialectic image. The very last image of *Paris est une fête*—specks of light that dot the nocturnal sky from paper lanterns released from Place de la République—visually mirrors the film’s very first image of lights on the Champs Élysées at Christmastime. This mirroring signals that the kind of feast represented by the paper lanterns that are launched in solemn silence above the statue of Marianne is a different kind of feast than the boisterous commercialism of global chain stores on the Elysian-fields-turned-*la-plus-belle-avenue-du-monde*.

Thus the film leaves me desiring, with a desire for that which is not inscribed by a deficiency, which is not inconceivable but certainly arduous and distressing to think about. There is something about desire-work that can be characterized as a distressed desire. The work entails being struck by the recognition that my view is “insuffisamment éveillée, encore tendue vers le savoir et absorbée par l’être, prisonnière de l’identique.”¹⁸ Will I ever be able to escape being a prisoner of my own prejudice, of seeing the other as ineluctably foreign to me? The film leaves me desiring, with no sense of resolution or sense of peace regarding my wretched inability to escape from my self-absorption, but it leaves me with a sense of liberation that comes from the certainty that the creative force that catches me in my stupor does not originate from me. From this liberated desire, I cock my ears when, after the paper lanterns fly away and the lights disappear into the dark sky, the voiceover of a child whispers into the black screen a line from Rimbaud’s “Vies”: “Qu’est mon néant, auprès de la stupeur qui vous attend?”

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Notes

1. Achille Mbembe, “L’identité n’est pas essentielle, nous sommes tous des passants,” *Le monde* (January 24, 2017), <https://z.umn.edu/49oj>.
2. Recent and early coverage include *La furia umana*, 31 (2017), <http://www.lafuriaumana.it/>; “Savoir où l’on place l’intolérable dans nos vies,” interview by Carine Fouteau and Joseph Confavreux (November 16, 2011), <http://www.mediapart.fr/>; and Gabriel Bortzmeier,

- "L'état d'incandescence (sur le cinéma de Sylvain George)," *Vacarme* 59 (April 28, 2012), <http://www.vacarme.org/article2130.html>.
3. "Paris est une fête—Un film en 18 vagues: Entretien avec Sylvain George," *Diacritik* (March 27, 2017), <https://z.umn.edu/49ok>.
 4. Debarati Sanyal, "Calais's 'Jungle': Refugees, Biopolitics, and the Arts of Resistance," *Representations*, 139:1 (2017): 1–33.
 5. Cited in Raquel Schefer, "À rebours (Des perspectives visuelles): Entretien avec Sylvain George autour de 'Paris est une fête—Un film en 18 vagues,'" *La furia umana* 31 (2017), <https://z.umn.edu/49ol>.
 6. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 300, 319.
 7. Jean-François Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1980), 51–65.
 8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 56.
 9. Jacques Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 67–68.
 10. Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1972), 70.
 11. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), 218.
 12. Jean-François Lyotard, *Flora danica: La sécession du geste dans la peinture de Stig Brøgger* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), 18.
 13. Jean-François Lyotard, *Textes dispersés*, vol. 1 (Leuven: Leuven U P, 2012), 70–74.
 14. The voiceover's words cite Henri Michaux's poem, "Liberté d'action."
 15. Marie-José Mondzain, "Paris est une fête—Un film en 18 vagues," *La furia umana* 31 (2017), <https://z.umn.edu/49om>; Jane Gaines, "Paris, the Nightmare," *La furia umana* 31 (2017), <https://z.umn.edu/49on>.
 16. Emmanuel Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1992), 51.
 17. Lyotard also speaks of a sense of *angoisse*, *misère*, *enfance* or *détresse* that keeps *éveil*. Corinne Enaudeau, "Levinas et Lyotard: La dette politique," *Esprit*, 1 (2007): 143–59.
 18. Guy Petitdemange, "Philosophie et violence," *Autrement que savoir* (Paris: Osiris, 1988), 25.