

CRITIQUE OF THE POWER OF PROPHECY

FEDERICO CAMPAGNA,
PROPHETIC CULTURE: RECREATION FOR ADOLESCENTS

LONDON: BLOOMSBURY, 2021. 280 PAGES.
 ISBN 9781350149625.

During the winter of 2022/23 the wave of protests in the public and private sectors in Britain intensified: Workers across the NHS, Royal Mail, civil service, and the transport network were already on strike in the ongoing row over conditions and pay, the London Underground had ratified a directive for an additional half a year of industrial action, whereas teachers, firefighters, and junior doctors were scheduled to vote on taking action. Regardless of how the conflict's impact on the rights and welfare of the British workers will play out, the labor strike is a salient example of the (im)possibility of society's alteration. On the one hand, it represents the legitimization of the wage-labor system; by aiming for improved conditions within the governing economic order, it also works as its reinforcement. From this perspective, industrial action on the labor market simply displays our lost capacity to imagine radically other futures. On the other hand, a critical understanding of this loss can itself have a powerful effect on our capacity to imagine another future. It is also from such a standpoint that the wide-ranging acts of solidarity we saw on the streets of London and in other cities come to symbolize precisely that collective action to—on the level of experience—pursue an alternative to what late philosopher Mark Fisher termed “capitalist realism”. A strategy that instead of seeking to overcome capital, focuses “on what capital must always obstruct: the collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy.”¹ For Fisher, the practice of collective imagination can incite thoughts of a different world and strike action, among other forms, can be understood as the materialization of such practice.

Prophetic Culture, by London based Italian philosopher and former anarchist gone theologian Federico Campagna (1984), performatively places itself at this very hinge moment of pressure and confusion where the demanding ecological, political, spiritual and psychic conditions calls for new narratives of worlding. At a

moment in time when prognostic futures devised for directing more stable realities are proved deficient, echoes of this call can be found in various fields. Another example is the widely discussed work of David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (2021), which rewrites the past to use the history of humanity to encourage a political rethinking of the social order of today. Following theorist and autonomist activist Franco Berardi's cultural concept of the future, in which the economic dimension of growth and expansion is key,² Campagna situates the reader in an imagined post-future of ecological exhaustion, infosphere acceleration, and nuclear accumulation. It's a present where the planetary apocalypse of the so-called 'Westernized Modernity' has already taken place. Today's prevailing sense of paralysis in face of an impoverished reality, both spiritually and sensually, is thereby confronted with a more or less verbatim pursuit of Fisher's impeded triad of production-care-enjoyment.

Accompanied by illustrations from Gianbattista Tiepolo's series of the life and adventures of *commedia dell'arte*'s trickster-character Pulcinella (the one who "survives the end of, if not *the* world, at least *a* world"),³ the book explores the long tradition of 'prophetic culture'. Campagna's revitalizing of this tradition aims to provide inspiration for cultural producers standing at the edge between worlds and ages. This is done through articulate reflections on the forms of cultural and political possibility found in Islamic and Judaeo-Christian mysticism as well as in legacies from past civilizations lost. Civilizations, which by way of their decline have also brought forth the continuation of world through 'syncretic disfigurement', exemplified in the story of the Nahua woman La Malinche, Cortes's enslaved interpreter, whose acts of translation represents both the betrayal and the survival of a familiar world coming to an end before the dawn of a new one (29). Thus, prophecy, rather than denoting a divinatory ability of telling the future, pertains to an existential impulse and a metaphysical concern with regards to questions such as: What can we do when it is already too late? How to speak to those who will come after this particular world has set? How to care for and facilitate their capacity of enjoyment and world-creation in the new time that is yet to begin but perhaps already felt?

These questions take their cue from the issue at heart in the author's earlier book titled *Technic and Magic* built on sources from the Mediterranean region—broadly understood—from Ibn Arabi to Mulla Sadra to Pessoa, 'Magic' entails the cultivation of ineffability of existence.⁴ As such, it stages the prophetic vision

of a spiritual elsewhere that can offer respite within, and through that opposition to, the metaphysical superstructure of our world of 'Technic'. That is, the hegemonic 'reality-setting' which in advanced capitalist countries is manifested in the dominance of objectification over subjectivity, the quantitative over the qualitative, etcetera.

Campagna primarily motivates his notion of 'world' as a simultaneously finite and indefinitely overflowing realm (157), rather than as an autonomous reality that simply exists, via a well-informed entwinement of several theological traditions. However, the concept implemented in both works strikes me as surprisingly Kantian. According to Kant, the world—as the absolute totality of all appearances—can only be 'an idea'.⁵ This thought, together with Kant's characterization of imagination as the faculty of seeing without the presence of an object,⁶ overlaps with what Campagna describes as the 'cosmographical act of worlding' in *Prophetic Culture*. That is the multidimensional constructs of imagination that can be engaged with in a continuous activity and which has the force to make present, in the present, those possibilities which are otherwise absently out of sight. Although Campagna does refer to the transcendental aesthetics of the *Critique of Pure Reason*—a minor one that concerns the innateness of time in relation to world-building (12)—he does not pay any attention to aesthetic experience in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. This is notable since it is the form and potentiality of this mode of experience that seems to ground the foundational 'as if'-nature of prophecy that Campagna promotes (105). Similarly to how the feeling of pleasure in aesthetic judgment is ascribed to the object as if beauty was a property to it,⁷ the quality of prophetic culture's act of re-veiling (of veiling *again*, in the sense of giving meaning to) is that it summons an atmosphere (or a *Stimmung* in Kant-speak) in which the possible is manifested; prophetic culture does not evoke 'some-thing' but *something* (173).

Despite Campagna's insights into the German idealist tradition (noticeable for example in his podcast series *Overmorrow's Library*), this absence points to a fixing of 'Kant' to a uniform and cliché role, as far as the philosophical tradition of 'Westernized Modernity' is concerned, in line with much self-critique of Euro-American critical theory in general. This further enforces the claim that the end of the techno-economics of exchange and control that dominate contemporary life is best prepared for with the help of thinkers who move beyond the narrow sphere of the intellectual tradition held paradigmatic to this particular reality setting.

However, the ghostly presence of Kantian aesthetics (*a priori* forms of intuition and reflective judgment) exemplifies a blind spot in Campagna's thinking that is productive in the sense that it negatively indicates the resources, found also within the maintenance of this tradition's own possibilities, to expand and transform its legacy.

The potential of such a critique makes me think of artist and philosopher Adrian Piper's account of her first encounter with Kant through the technical terminology of Vedic philosophy.⁸ The way Piper found the Samkhyan and Yogic concepts of *puruṣa* to illuminate her understanding of the Kantian notion of the 'synthetic unity of apperception' points to a strength shared by *Prophetic Culture* at large. It's a strength found, not in its claim, but in the method of its aesthetic exposition. Through lyrical assemblages of perspectives, from Native-American Winnebago culture and Dadaist poetry to Neo-platonic mysticism, choruses across time and space voice the tenets of prophetic culture. This way of showing rather than telling what it means to turn the world 'from a serious game, into a game that can be played seriously' (159), makes the book set up an enthusing library of imagery and references. Even though the brevity of some reflections and the extensive use of secondary (or even thirdhand) sources at times give a slack impression, it is in this librarian sense—that is, as both community center and archive—that the book's aim to provide tools for reconstructing lost worlds works best. That is also why the final chapter's literary meta-narrative, where central figures and principles of prophecy such as the 'grotesque' are put to work, so harshly eclipse the force of aesthetic enjoyment found in the juxtapositions of poetic, philosophical and theological material in the theoretical chapters. Although a pedagogically admirable idea, this coda leaves too much to wish for when it comes to evoking any vibes of prophecy.

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- 1 Mark Fisher, from “acid communism (unfinished introduction)” in *K-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004–2016)*, ed. Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater, 2018).
- 2 Franco Berardi, *After the Future* (Edinburgh, Baltimore: AK Press, 2011), 673.
- 3 Giorgio Agamben, *Pulcinella: Or Entertainment for Children*, trans. Kevin Attell (London: Seagull Books, 2018), 11.
- 4 Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic, The Reconstruction of Reality* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).
- 5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and eds., Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A328/B384. For a definition of idea see A327/B383.
- 6 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. and ed. Robert Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), §15, AA 7:153.
- 7 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer, eds. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:218, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804656>.
- 8 Adrian Piper, “Philosophy en Route to Reality: A Bumpy Ride,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 4 (2019): 106–118.