

Schwerpunkt | Individualism on the Beach

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Abstract

Like Dante, we are invited to a place, where we can see “the woeful people, who have lost the good of the understanding”. It is set up by Lina Lapelyte, Vaiva Grainyte and Rugile Barzdziukaite in the opera-performance *Sun & Sea*, first shown as a durational performance in English at the Lithuanian Pavilion of the 2019 Biennale in Venice. In the following essay, I will analyse the *SONG OF EXHAUSTION. WORKAHOLIC'S SONG*, one of 14 songs performed in the opera, in a social context, framed by Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx.



Abbildung 1: © Andrej Vasilenko

Exhausted lava

“Noi siam venuti al loco ov’ io t’ ho detto / che tu vedrai le genti dolorose / c’ hanno perduto il ben dell’ intelletto.”¹

Like Dante, we are invited to a place, where we can see “the woeful people, who have lost the good of the understanding”². It is set up by Lina Lapelyte, Vaiva Grainyte and Rugile Barzdzukaite in the opera-performance *Sun & Sea*, first shown as a durational performance in English at the Lithuanian Pavilion of the 2019 Biennale in Venice. In the following essay, I will analyse the *SONG OF EXHAUSTION. WORKAHOLIC’S SONG*, one of 14 songs performed in the opera, in a social context, framed by Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx.

The entire Pavilion’s floor serves as a stage and is completely covered with sand. A crowd of people lies on towels or sunlounges, reading, checking their phones, playing badminton or cards. Some are on their own, some grouped as couples or small families, comprised of a man, a woman, and up to two children. They communicate, if they communicate at all, almost exclusively with those they know, their family or partner. They do not interact with the other people present at the beach. I will discuss later in this essay whether this isolation even results in genuine communication taking place.

A middle-aged man holding a *Forbes* Magazine, apparently unnoticed by anyone else, sings alone:

*But suppressed emotions, I noticed, don’t
disappear so easily,
They get knotted up in your psyche:
Suppressed negativity finds a way out
unexpectedly,
Like lava.
LIKE LAVA, LIKE LAVA, LIKE LAVA,
LIKE LAVA...*

¹ Dante Alighieri: *La Commedia. Die Göttliche Komödie. I Inferno / Hölle. Italienisch/ Deutsch. In Prosa übersetzt und kommentiert von Hartmut Köhler*. Stuttgart 2011, p. 44. See: “We have come to the place where I have told thee that thou shalt see the woeful people, who have lost the good of the understanding”, in: Dante Alighieri: *The Divine Comedy. Translated by Charles Eliot Norton*. Chicago et al. 1952, p. 4.

² Ibid.

*I feel so bad when I can't control myself,
And I lose my cool in public.
Then I feel sorry for myself, guilty,
I feel ashamed...*³

The other people on the beach join him in singing while still concentrating on their playing cards, phones, or books:

*LIKE LAVA, LIKE LAVA, LIKE LAVA,
LIKE LAVA...
EXHAUSTION, EXHAUSTION,
EXHAUSTION, EXHAUSTION,
IT'S LIKE A MAMMOTH –
A NON-EXISTENT CREATURE
GONE EXTINCT:
ENCYCLOPEDIAS, THE ANNALS OF
HISTORY– HAVE IT,
BUT IN LIFE – A THING YOU'LL
NEVER MEET
YOU'LL NEVER MEET
YOU'LL NEVER MEET...*⁴

Everyone on the beach complains about exhaustion, that bursts out of them “LIKE LAVA,” indicating that they all share a common emotion and are in a similar burnt out mental state. Despite all singing the same lines at the same time, they do not behave like a group because they are not connected. There is a dramatic difference between the acoustic and the visual impression the chorus gives. Acoustically, they form a perfect union – with one exception, which I will touch on later. Yet, visually, there is no connection that can be noticed at all. They all appear too preoccupied with themselves to notice anything around them. However, as self-absorbed as they seem, they remain alienated and isolated from themselves just as much as they are isolated and alienated from the world around them.

The *WORKAHOLIC'S SONG* suggests that the man's primary relation to his own emotions is characterised by repression. He demands from himself control over, not engagement with, his feelings, and separates himself from them entirely: “I finally learned to stay calm, / Not to take my state of mind home.”⁵

³ Grainytë, Vaiva: “Sun & Sea. (Marina)”, https://www.sunandsea.lt/Sun-and-Sea_libretto.pdf (Accessed 28 February 2021), p. 5.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

A reason for this need for control lies in the social pressure exerted by his work environment.

*I really don't feel that I can let myself
slow down,
Because my colleagues will look down
on me.
They'll say I have no strength of will.
And I'll become a loser in my own eyes.⁶*

He adopts his colleagues' presumed opinion of himself as well as their perspective, observing himself from the outside. The man's demonstrated disconnection from himself and society derives from the nature of the capitalist mode of production. As Marx points out, wage labour alienates humans from nature, from themselves and from others.

Indem die entfremdete Arbeit dem Menschen 1. die Natur entfremdet, 2. sich selbst, seine eigene Funktion, seine Lebenstätigkeit, so entfremdet sie dem Menschen die Gattung; sie macht ihm das Gattungsleben zum Mittel des individuellen Lebens. Erstens entfremdet sie ihm das Gattungsleben und das individuelle Leben, und zweitens macht sie das letztere in seiner Abstraktion zum Zweck des ersten, ebenfalls in seiner abstrakten und entfremdeten Form.⁷

The same alienation can be seen in the chorus's singing about their exhaustion. Only their words let the audience know their state of mind, while their body language does not change. There appears to be a significant discrepancy between their verbal and nonverbal expressions. Thus, these ostensible individuals are divided even further. Their thoughts, emotions, words, their vocal expression and body language are all unconnected. Fittingly, the way the chorus sings is reminiscent of a lethargic, muddy river, rather than of lava erupting from a volcano. Their singing performance is no real act, but a deterioration into a lethargic description of, and surrender to, the status quo. During and after the song, everything stays exactly the same.

There are two reasons why the collective speech of the *WORKAHOLIC'S SONG* does not affect the individuals within the Chorus. Firstly, it is not directed at other people and it is not received in any way. Speech serves a communicative purpose⁸, but in this

⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

⁷ Marx, Karl: „Ökonomisch Philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844“, in: *Marx-Engels-Werke, Band 40*. Berlin 2012, p. 516.

⁸ „Die Sprache ist so alt wie das Bewußtsein – die Sprache ist das praktische, auch für andere Menschen existierende wirkliche Bewußtsein, und die Sprache entsteht, wie das Bewußtsein, erst aus

instance there seems to be no communication. As united as the chorus seems auditorily, the more divided they prove to be when you see them scattered across the beach. Secondly, although they only appear to be expressing themselves, when actually they are only talking about a symptom – exhaustion – not about the root of that symptom or their own desires. Those desires are, as the *workaholic* points out, suppressed and covered by a heavy layer of exhaustion and inertia.

In the absence of awareness of any political concern, the public space they occupy turns into a private space. As Hannah Arendt describes in *The Human Condition*: “[T]he public [...] has become a function of the private and the private [...] has become the only common concern left.”⁹ Coming from a purely private viewpoint, the people singing in this scene cannot develop a sense of solidarity between themselves. They individualise, and thereby privatise their misery, unable to recognise their problems as structural. So, they are unable to see, that their lives are embedded in a social structure, as well. Instead of launching a movement based on common interests, they remain isolated and helpless:

*[M]en have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times.*¹⁰

Arendt is correct that isolation is felt by every individual alone, no matter how many singular individuals experience it collectively. However, it is important to add that this isolation does not happen by chance but is systematically created. The same subjectively singular experience is being produced again and again. The chorus perceptively recognises this fact:

*OFFICIALLY, THE CREATURE DOES
NOT EXIST, BUT ACTUALLY,
IT'S A SPECIES THAT BREEDS AT
THE HIGHEST RATE.*¹¹

dem Bedürfnis, der Notdurft des Verkehrs mit anderen Menschen“ Engels, Friedrich/Marx, Karl: „Die deutsche Ideologie. Kritik der neuesten deutschen Philosophie in ihren Repräsentanten Feuerbach, b. Bauer und Stirner, und des deutschen Sozialismus in seinen verschiedenen Propheten“, in: *Marx-Engels-Werke*, Band 3. Berlin 1959, p. 30.

⁹ Arendt, Hannah: *The Human Condition*. Chicago 1958, p. 69.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

¹¹ Grainy: “Sun & Sea”, p. 5.

Exhaustion is a “creature”, “a species that breeds at the highest rate”. Two ideas are expressed in this statement. On the one hand, it shows that exhaustion is not limited to a single incident or a single person. On the other hand, the metaphor of exhaustion as a fast -breeding species demonstrates a misconception. It suggests that the exhaustion is acting on its own and therefore dissociates the symptom from the disease.

The *SONG OF EXHAUSTION. WORKAHOLIC'S SONG* shows the vacationers are quite self-aware in that they can analyse their mental state. At the same time, it shows that they ignore the reasons for their mental conditions. Truly understanding their own situation or organising for a political objective would require a crucial step: comprehending the system that causes their misery and perceiving themselves as capable to act. Lacking this comprehension, they don't act on their discontent even though they are aware of it.

Recreating labour-power

Considering that the chorus is imprisoned in an individualised perspective, it is a logical consequence that they all seek individual relief from their seemingly individual misery. It is no less logical that all of these individuals arrive separately at the same 'solution,' again experiencing something common in an isolated way: Everyone is going on the same vacation in order to recover just enough to be able to bear the stress of their everyday lives until the next vacation. The negative impact their (working) life has on their mind and body is seemingly lifted for a moment.

VACATION IS WHAT KILLED THE
MAMMOTH –
[...]
AFTER VACATION,
YOUR HAIR SHINES,
YOUR EYES GLITTER,
EVERYTHING IS FINE.¹²

The people portrayed in *Sun & Sea* handle the problematic conditions of their lives by simply enduring them and distracting themselves through means of consumption. There is a short moment of relief, the exhaustion seems to be overcome,

¹² Ibid.

“EVERYTHING IS FINE”. Being “fine” in this instance is defined by superficial criteria alone – you are fine if you look fine. This reprieve allows them to resume pretending that they are not in fact overwhelmed and exhausted.

This “solution” is no solution at all, only a brief respite from a never-ending rat race. Not only is the chorus not contributing to sustainable improvement of their own situation as their suppressed emotions keep boiling just below the surface, always on the verge of spilling over unchecked. They remain within the confines of a capitalist logic, in which vacation is only a means to replenish the commodified labour-power in order to exploit it as efficiently as possible.

*Innerhalb der Grenzen des absolut Notwendigen ist daher die individuelle Konsumtion der Arbeiterklasse Rückverwandlung der vom Kapital gegen Arbeitskraft veräußerten Lebensmittel in vom Kapital neu exploitierbare Arbeitskraft. Sie ist Produktion und Reproduktion des dem Kapitalisten unentbehrlichsten Produktionsmittels, des Arbeiters selbst.*¹³

The vacation is therefore not an escape from the system. It is a necessary part of that system, since it is needed to sustain the power of wage-dependents labour. As the *workaholic* indicates, it is impossible for him to maintain his strength while working:

*And at work there are unwritten rules,
we could call them etiquette:
Don't complain when things get difficult,
When you are lacking sleep,
When you are under the weather.
Even if you run out of gas – just keep
smiling...*¹⁴

The expression “run out of gas” is especially revealing. The man appears to have internalised a view of himself that portrays him not as a human being, but rather a machine that will run smoothly if you fill it with enough fuel.

Since there is not sufficient space for physical or emotional needs during a normal working week, the vacation presents a possibility to tend to these needs – within a predefined time frame. The *workaholic* works until all his energy is drained and his health affected, then restores a fraction of that energy on vacation, and then resumes

¹³ Marx, Karl: „Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie“, in: *Marx-Engels-Werke*, Band 23. Berlin 1962, p. 597.

¹⁴ Grainyè: “Sun & Sea”, p. 5.

working to the point of exhaustion. It is important to note at this point that the man never actually joins the choir in singing that everything is fine. While they sing about the extinction of the ‚mammoth‘, about their shiny hair and glittering eyes, he keeps repeating one word: exhaustion.

It is not sufficient to change one's individual consumer behaviour or one's individual working conditions to break out of this seemingly endless cycle. Consumption, in this case going on vacation, is needed as a coping mechanism. Removing this mechanism without first changing the material conditions which prompted it in the first place can only lead to either a different coping strategy that is perhaps even more harmful or to more severe exhaustion and isolation. There is no point in abandoning the illusive wellness consumption creates, without addressing the reality it masks.

Die Forderung, die Illusionen über seinen Zustand aufzugeben, ist die Forderung, einen Zustand aufzugeben, der der Illusionen bedarf. [...] Die Kritik hat die imaginären Blumen an der Kette zerpflückt, nicht damit der Mensch die phantasielose, trostlose Kette trage, sondern damit er die Kette abwerfe und die lebendige Blume breche.¹⁵

It could be argued that a person should adjust their working conditions, that if they are exhausted, maybe they simply have the wrong job or the wrong attitude to it. It might even be true, that in a different line of work the *workaholic* portrayed in *Sun & Seam* might be happier and more relaxed. There are however, two main problems with this argumentation. The first problem is that it puts an undue burden on the individual to cope with the unhealthy systematic conditions they are presented with. It ignores the fact that these conditions will wear out the next person just as much as the first one. As we have seen in the opera, the problem arises for every person in the chorus, no matter their position. The second problem is that changing your profession does not provide relief from the necessity of wage labour. For both reasons an individual solution to a systemic problem cannot exist.

Without infamy and without praise

In several instances, the chorus invokes the image of lava. It is an image of a powerful, dangerous substance full of energy, destroying everything in its way. This image is

¹⁵ Marx, Karl: „Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung“, in: *Marx-Engels-Werke*, Band 1. Berlin 1981, p. 379.

directly contradicted by the hollow way it is presented. Instead of spending their resources trying to avoid negative feelings, they need to embrace the energetic, violent potential of the lava inside them to eradicate the cause of those feelings.

Otherwise, they remain in a state remarkably like limbo in Dante's *inferno*: "Questo misero modo tengon l'anime triste di coloro / che visser sanza infamia e sanza lodo."¹⁶

¹⁶ Dante: *La Commedia*, p. 46. "The wretched souls of those who lived without infamy and without praise maintain this miserable mode." Dante: *The Divine Comedy*, p. 4.

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Hewelt, Marie: „Schwerpunkt | Individualism on the Beach“, in: Prof. Dr. Jörn Etzold, Dr. Leon Gabriel, Marie Hewelt, Lioba Magney, Rika Sakalak (Hg.): *Grenzen der Repräsentation – Krise der Demokratie* (Thewis. Online-Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Theaterwissenschaft, Jg. 2021 / Vol. 8 / Ausg. 1), S. 40-49, DOI 10.21248/thewis.8.2021.92