

Zombies, Attention and the Sublime in the Digital Anthropocene

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Abstract

This essay offers a meta-critique of the aesthetic and political categories of “the Anthropocene sublimes.” It is interested in the short-film *Zombies* (2019) by filmmaker Baloji, and takes it as an aesthetic catalyst to address some timely questions about the Anthropocene vis-à-vis the digital ecosystem that surround us: What are the prospects of the sublime in an era of generalized attention deficiency? How is the imaginative potential of the sublime foreclosed by our collective suffering of attention deficiency in a Capitalocene? Relatedly, what is the link between, on the one hand, the common interruption of a sustained attention and, on the other hand, the thwarted efficacy of the sublime as an apparatus of critical and eco-consciousness? I look to the film *Zombies* to consider the possibility of responding to its inferred injunction to reclaim attention as one practice in countering the snares of a networked global economy driven by an abiding digital imperative.

Keywords: Attention, attention economy, attention ecology, digital Anthropocene, the sublime.

Resumen

Este ensayo ofrece una meta-crítica de las categorías estéticas y políticas de “los sublimes del Antropoceno.” Se centra en el cortometraje *Zombies* (2019) del cineasta Baloji, tomándolo como un catalizador estético para abordar cuestiones clave sobre el Antropoceno en relación con el ecosistema digital que nos rodea: ¿Cuáles son las perspectivas de lo sublime en una era de déficit generalizado de atención? ¿Cómo se ve limitado el potencial imaginativo de “lo sublime” por nuestro sufrimiento colectivo de déficit de atención en el Capitaloceno? En esta misma línea, ¿qué relación existe entre, por un lado, la interrupción constante de la atención sostenida y, por otro, la eficacia menguante de lo sublime como dispositivo de conciencia crítica y ecológica? A través de *Zombies*, exploro la posibilidad de responder a su aparente llamada a reclamar la atención como una práctica para contrarrestar las trampas de una economía global en red impulsada por un imperativo digital permanente.

Palabras clave: Atención, economía de la atención, ecología de la atención, Antropoceno digital, lo sublime.

Compared to the rather dull program of sustainable development, theorizing the movement of humanity as a telluric force seems much more exciting than reflecting on modes of production, energy transition, or degrowth.

Jean-Baptiste Fressoz

I don't believe our species can survive unless we fix this. We cannot have a society in which, if two people wish to communicate, the only way that can happen is if it's financed by a third person who wishes to manipulate them.

Jaron Lanier

Exploring the convergence of attention economies and planetary ecologies, this essay offers a meta-critique of the aesthetic and political categories of the Anthropocene sublims. Traversing the terrain of the attention economy by way of a politics of aesthetics, I explore how Congolese artist, Baloji, in his ecological short-film *Zombies* (2019), artfully captures the intersection of aesthetics, technology, and attention in the contemporary digital economy. I argue that Baloji renders the digital Anthropocene as it manifests in the Congo in ways that complicate familiar notions of the sublime. With its 15-minute runtime, Baloji's self-directed short can be read as an extended music video to an Afrobeat urban soundtrack that challenges the basic distinction between "traditional" Congolese music—soukous and rumba—and "modern" tonalities of techno and pop. No doubt, the effectiveness of its visual language is enhanced by a corresponding sonic texture that indexes the ecological degradation of Kinshasa—the capital and largest city of the Democratic Republic of Congo—along with the zombification of its inhabitants whose behavior, desire and affective disposition is overdetermined by digital, platform networks and their associated "attention economy." I consider the possibility of responding to the film's inferred injunction to reclaim attention as one practice of countering the snares of a networked global economy driven by an abiding digital imperative.

The political value of aesthetics may appear overstated at a time when planetary life is more threatened than ever by techno-imperial forces of what Nick Srnicek would call "platform capitalism" (10). While the discourses of the Anthropocene have been ringing the alarm to alert us that we're projected towards a point of no-return, they have also inadvertently fostered a nihilistic attitude that there's no stopping the "natural" forward thrust of innovation. Though efforts can be made to curtail and delay climate catastrophe, such an attitude implies, we're all headed for a fall, and it's best we buckle up for the inevitable. Politicians and some state governments have even come to accept the planetary cost of unbridled innovation in tech, be it the shocking amount of electricity it takes to power our aggressive forays into artificial intelligence, the next and ultimate frontier of the tech economy (Bridle), or the virtual enslavement and defilement of humans made to

break their back in toxic mines in order to extract the raw materials that go into the devices of our daily consumption habits (Kara).

Against this backdrop, *Zombies* offers fleeting, impressionistic flashes of the ubiquity of the mobile device through a figure akin to the *dérive*, one who practices attention to sensibilities, the typical figure of psychogeography who takes in the urban surroundings to deliberately reflect on the emotional and psychic shifts, the spirit, of the city. The opening scene of *Zombies* takes place in a barbershop, where a patron sings the catchy earworm that will come to a crescendo in subsequent scenes: “light on face / everybody shines / stuck to their phones / [...] people dance no more / everyone got the spotlight.” As our protagonist leaves the barbershop, probably having picked up the earworm himself, we perceive an atmosphere of vibrant potentiality brimming in the streets of Kinshasa as he walks briskly through congested traffic and crowded alleyways. Then we cut to a sequence in which our guiding figure of the *dérive*, roaming into night, passes by some curious phenomena amidst the humdrum of the bustling streets. The “ubiquity” of the mobile device is suggested from the start, as we observe him observing, standing as both a witness and spectator to a street-fight between two boys. That is, we watch our protagonist witness the real scene unfolding in front of him, as he simultaneously observes it over the shoulder of a bystander who films the brawl on their phone. Right next to this situation, three people stand in the dark with their arms stretched out, holding a smartphone angled just above the head as if to capture a selfie. A white light from their devices illuminates their motionless faces, and we see the first instance of the ubiquity, “the pixilated mirror” that works only to create “a ubiquitous dream in a megabyte mirage” (*Zombies*). As one critic notes, what the film depicts are ostensibly “instances of incessant dependency on mobile technology, and vis-à-vis colonial ways of being and existing in the world,” a world in which experience can sometimes feel “not real unless it is snapped, posted, viewed and liked” (Dayile). It takes an artist as versatile and all-purpose as Baloji to draw out the themes of a techno zeitgeist. In an age like ours, in which forms of expression such as images, video, sound and text have taken a socially adhesive quality, Baloji’s film warns of the corrupting relation between constant connectivity our collective attention, as well as the degradation of the environment. Using diverse aesthetic forms, from a consistently flamboyant visual language to a sonic and poly-rhythmic sensibility accompanied by elegant dance, *Zombies* touches on the web of socio-political relationality, the self-possession and individuality of an attention economy, and the potential vitality of life lived against the backdrop of a necro-political and neo-colonial structure.

From the first frame in the barbershop to the end credits presented in the form of back-and-forth text messages, the cellphone as the film’s conceit is everywhere present. The technical and cinematographic choices that contribute to the production suggest an experimentalist on the move: the poetry and musicality of a hybrid, visual-sonic enterprise, coupled with the urgency of the medium as the message, makes *Zombies* a video object conducive to easy circulation and distribution. Indeed, the film is shot using an ARRI Mini camera in a 1.33:1 aspect ratio, giving it a retro and box-

shaped frame reminiscent of an old television screen. Beginning with this immediate impression of staring at an old TV, the literal frame and visual effect produced by the aspect ratio is meant to reinforce the ubiquity of screens in our day-to-day rituals. At the same time, the geometric parameters produced by this framing indicate that we are distanced from that which we observe, even as we participate in screening its message and medium. Moreover, the entire film blends the brightness and highlights of the camera it was made on, renowned for its color science and its “dynamic range”—that is, its capacity to enhance the best of both worlds, dark tones as well as bright hues in vivid and richly saturated image quality, evidenced in the contrast of shadows and vibrant strokes that are everywhere in *Zombies*. With a tendency to synesthesia, Baloji is drawn to yellow as representative of Kinshasa’s soundscape. Indeed, this color resonates with “Kaniama: Yellow Version,” the first of only three tracks on his 2019 album of the same name. In this particular film, yellow attracts attention from the very beginning: a yellow t-shirt worn by the barber; a close up of his handy work reveals his clippers—yellow masking-tape wrapped around the base of the blade that glides across a bald head of a patron; a convoy of Kinshasa’s yellow minibus taxis reflected in the mirror he sings to; an assortment of foods sold by street vendors. Yellow is the color in which the artist figures this world of half-aliveness, the anti-social mood of the digital world and, importantly, a reactivating potential within it.

While the film’s portrayal of the social and cultural cost of digital capitalism is a buoyant springboard to discussion of the video object, I’m equally interested in the scenes of resistance and world-making in Baloji’s depiction of Kinshasa as synecdoche for several global south geographies characterized by their historical and material underdevelopment through Euro-American extractivist schemes. Baloji’s film provokes several questions about the affective modalities of the digital Anthropocene, for instance, the unevenly borne weight of what scholars have called “solastalgia,” the emotional and psychic distress brought on by a wounded world from which we have become estranged (Albrecht). I’m therefore interested in *Zombies* because it offers an aesthetic vector by which to raise some timely questions about the Anthropocene vis-à-vis the digital ecosystem that surrounds us: What are the prospects of the sublime in an era of generalized attention deficiency? How is the imaginative potential of “the sublime” foreclosed by our collective suffering of attention deficiency in what has been dubbed a “Capitalocene” (Moore 5-9)? Relatedly, what is the link between, on the one hand, the common interruption of a sustained attention and, on the other hand, the thwarted efficacy of the sublime as an apparatus of critical and eco-consciousness?

I track the combination of music and visuals in *Zombies* as an aesthetic challenge to the ocular-centrism of prevailing concepts of the sublime. Baloji’s musically inflected short-film engenders a type of sonic sublime which registers sound itself as a quasi-spiritual impulse that exceeds the ambit of representation, and that thereby reorients discussions about attention and cognition in the era of the digital Anthropocene. The rationale for taking *Zombies* as an interpretive guide is that

it brings together a critique of the instruments of technology, as well as the self-styling platforms of the network ecology, to offer commentary on the political economy of attention in our techno-social time, a time when the modalities of socialization have become profoundly attached to commercialization.

Naturally, one of the intertextual threads in Baloji's project is the spirit of Fela Kuti—the grandfather of Afrobeats. Bode Omojola's *Yoruba Music in the Twentieth Century* (2012) or Sola Olorunyomi's *Afrobeat! Fela and the Imagined Continent* (2022) are helpful maps in tracing at least one branch of *Zombies'* sonic and aesthetic genealogy. Indeed, Fela's 1976 record, *Zombie*, is a close relative of the film. Baloji's connection to Fela's record is both technical and thematic, though this may go unnoticed since the 1976 title-track is often reductively understood to be a caricature of a soldier, a yes-man fully at the disposal of the Nigerian state armed forces. We could also consider that Fela's eponymous fourteen-minute opening track is not merely a critique of soldiers' obsequiousness to military rule. It also serves as a warning to those civilians beyond the preserve of the military, criticizing their ethical pliability, their being willfully committed to the domestication and pacification of their minds by any controlling authority that wishes to manipulate them. Fela's "Zombie" famously uses call and response to play out a commando drill. In the list of commands that the speaker issues, between his call and the chorus' response, there is a faint sense that psychic potentiality is there for the taking. The song's syncopated baseline is both invitation and suspension—you follow the motion of a beckoning groove that teases a pause or caesura before being yanked out of a trance when Fela barks "Attention!" like a General snapping his fingers at a foot-soldier drifting off on duty. Attention, as the analogue word, here, prepares the zombie to obediently see to a litany of arbitrary instructions. The universal reach of Fela's political intent and social commentary in "Zombie" resonates with the thematic focus of other tracks on the same record such as "Mr. Follow Follow." Philip Effiong has observed a common misinterpretation of the soldier as zombie in the song, noting that while the commands in the song "reinforce the overall cynical tone, however, these commands are not exclusively used by the armed forces. They are also used during drills and parades by members of Nigeria's Customs Service, Police Force, Boys' Brigade, Girl Scouts and Immigration Service" (66). In other words, the many headed organs of the state and general civilian public. Fela's critique in "Zombie," both the title-track and record, fully anticipated the effects of a society zonked out and in waiting, amenable to the normalization of their own docility. After all, as he repeats—"Zombie no go think, unless you tell am to think." It is this recurring and all-out appropriation of mind and attention that telegraphs us directly to Baloji's concern with the digital economy's control and large-scale modification of both human and nature.



Figure 1: *Zombies*, 2019.

***Zombies*, Platform Complex and the Digital Sublime**

We can begin from the idea that our experience of time passing is acutely felt when, increasingly, every facet of our lives unfolds within the ambit of the digital. The link between, on the one hand, the erosion of public relations and ethics and, on the other hand, the erosion of planet, is a feature of the digital age that reveals how “capitalist colonialist thinking, loneliness, and an abusive stance towards the environment all coproduce one another” (Odell xvii). The affective modulations of “sense communities,” along with a corruption of cognitive capacities, suggest the need for more psycho-political accounts of the aesthetic, cultural and social dynamics organized by an economy that relies on digital information technology. I would therefore estimate that the problem in the digital Anthropocene lies at the juncture of time and temporality; the commodification of our inherent neuroplasticity; the profit-based manipulation of individual and collective libidinal energies; and the slow violence unleashed upon the earth. This is to say, whether it is the virtual mining of mass data on the one end, or the illicit mining of cobalt on the other, extraction is the name of the game in the contemporary digital economy.

Weaving various threads of debates from the domain of the attention economy and affect theory, I suggest that questions about how and where to reroute our attention are crucial in the effort to locate the center of gravity for political action in a time of the digital Anthropocene. I propose that we might think about attention not merely as one casualty of politics among others, but to rather understand attention as the very birthplace of politics. This would mean that awareness of the present, to which a recouped attention span potentially gives way, might approach an answer to overarching questions about the infrastructures of connectivity and the outward resemblance of a new type of attention crisis. One example of a question that presently haunts cultural critique, and that has gained more sustained inquiry in

recent years, is posed by the artist and theorist Jenny Odell in her popular manifesto, *How To Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (2019). There she prompts: “What does it mean to construct digital worlds while the actual world is crumbling before our eyes?” (xiv). As I show in this essay, the anticipation of such a question comes up against the point that Balaji’s film seeks to illustrate: in contemporary society, the digital world has all but eclipsed the material world, or has at least profoundly subordinated to it such that the boundary between online and off has become irrevocably unstable.

The machinations of the algorithm’s operations and processes today are simply too overwhelming to fully comprehend. James Bridle, in his book *The New Dark Age* (2016), approaches a description of contemporary cyberspace as sublime when he writes that the “cloud” today is “the central metaphor of the internet: a global system of great power and energy that nevertheless retains the aura of something noumenal and numinous, something almost impossible to grasp” (13). The sublime, as an intense experience of the sensorium often characterized as unspeakable because it troubles, eludes, and unsettles re-presentation, is not easily backed-up by the signifiatory powers of a metaphor, and we might even say it brings metaphoricity itself to crisis. This is, at least, according to the Kantian model in which the analytic of the sublime consists primarily as a matter of mentality or cognition, and, we should also add, as a matter of attention. To the Kantian tradition of the sublime, we might also raise a political and conceptual paradox from the perspective of the contemporary moment that has to do, for one thing, with our ability to make ourselves available to an experience of the sublime in the first instance.

One hopes that the sublime is in the material world and not on the screen. Yet in order to be seriously stunned into awe by what I perceive, I must first secure the presence of mind to notice (that I am having) an experience. In the attention crisis of the digital, however, the more time I spend disposed to and preoccupied by platform networks, the more I squander opportunities wherein I might stumble upon something transcendental, that which activates an awareness of the time of perception and situatedness in place. This paradox of the sublime therefore calls into question its cultural-analytic quality in a moment when our collective attention spans have waned, when psychic and imaginative life is shot through with algorithmic overdeterminations.

In his book, *The Political Sublime* (2018), Michael Shapiro ventures to “articulate a politics of aesthetics that can capture the political implications of catastrophic events” (2) and thereby attempts to retrieve the category of the sublime for political ends. By allowing for the possibility that a politics of aesthetics might facilitate interventions that help us apprehend and “make sense of” our present political struggles against institutional and other forms of power, he defends the analytic of the sublime from charges that it is outdated and indulgent, if not somewhat conservative. If there is aesthetic and political value to be found in the sublime, we catch at it from the Rancièrian vantage point that “politics is sublime,” and that its sublimity inheres, importantly, in its interface with radical alterity. Redeploying the

Kantian model of aesthetic faculty, Shapiro asserts that “the aesthetic nature of politics” rather than signaling “a specific single world” instead calls for the recognition of a “world of competing worlds” (4). That would mean, in the most optimistic and reconfigured payoff of this analytic, different “sense communities” find and see each other more relationally to try and exploit an intuition of the transcendental in search of a shared ethos:

the attention-grabbing experience of the sublime therefore leads not (as Kant had hoped) toward a shared moral sensibility but to an ethico-political sensibility that recognizes the fragilities of our grasp of experience and enjoins engagement with a pluralist world in which the in-common must be continually negotiated. (4)

The political wellspring articulated above does not merely yield aesthetic value judgments, but also ways of seeing, feeling and therefore inhabiting the world. Given the multiplicity of individuated worlds in the regime of the digital and in platform capitalism, the revolutionary potential contained in an aesthetic politics may yet suture the ever-widening chasm between the atomized individual who thinks and moves within a solipsistic world, and a social relationality from which techno-capitalist forces have alienated us.

While Balaji’s film gestures towards the social fracture resulting from the mediation of mobile devices, it also subtly hints at the movement of time passing, and the ecological timescale of the planet. In this sense *Zombies* shares a political objective with the works of scholars of attention such as Tiziana Terranova who, in her book *After the Internet: Networks Between Capital and the Common* (2020), considers the possibility of loopholes of retreat from the enclosed architecture of the internet. If the self-contained individual of neoliberalism faces a hard time staging resistance to the attention economy, it is because they are coerced into perpetual harvesting of their attentive and cognitive faculties as well as their affective drives:

Like and dislikes, beliefs and disbeliefs, unthought motivations are the new psychic forces subtending modes of cooperation that do not imply division of labor but relations, such as following and being followed, shaped by the action of forces such as sympathy and antipathy, asymmetrical and mutual possession. (40)

There are several positions from which to track the development of an attention economy. The predominant view of attention is that it is a resource and that it is therefore bound to scarcity. The model of attention scarcity, as Terranova vividly and helpfully sketches, follows the pattern of market and commercial orders when confronted with the abyss of Information that encompasses the internet. The bleak irony of a scarcity equation is that: “attention here becomes the quantity which is ‘consumed’ by that which is abundant, that is, information” (35). Simply put, there is a sure limit to the checkbook I use to pay attention, there is only so much of my mindshare that I can allocate to different tasks at the same time. So forceful is this molestation of the imaginative realm that Odell half-jokingly writes, “one might say that the parks and libraries of the self are always about to be turned into condos” (15). Therefore, the idea of limited supply and unlimited demand configures an attention economy as “the re-orientation of capitalist competition for scarce resources towards

the scramble to capture users' limited attention span" (Terranova 68). In this model, attention happens under the auspices of time, and since by all accounts time is money, it goes without saying that the apparatuses of engineered addiction only work to hold us captive in its cycles of reproduction. There are no unwilling subjects, because even when we strive to "do nothing," we exist in an ecology of networked platforms coopted by finance capital to such an extent that nothing can easily become something, and the becoming-something of "nothing" can itself be captured within the feedback loop of surplus-value, attention and time that flows directly into the entities vying for our incessant engagement with their product.

It's interesting to note that although our existing relation to an attention economy may seem natural, the emergence of platform capitalism is, technically, preceded by a socialist impulse. Indeed, free mass sharing of data "mostly by means of non-proprietary software" (28) laid the foundation for tech companies to turn scarcity into revenue. If the organization of society in service of a common good seems utopic or less than possible, it's better to view the trajectory of the platform age as capital's internal retaliation against "the worrisome possibility of digital socialism" (28) engendered by those earlier free modes of participation. The subsequent adoption of platforms *en masse* is indicative of the consumerist temperament that marked potentiality as lucrative and sought to redefine growth "from participation to revenue" (36). The platform complex does not exist *ex nihilo*, and though it requires growing participation of individuals, the restitution of attention is not an individual's issue:

If the attention economy somehow degrades the quality of libidinal energy, this is not due to some intrinsic limits of the human capacity to pay attention or to the inevitable effects of technique, but rather to a specific conception and organization of the economic system which overlooks the importance of libidinal energy to the production of the psyche and the social. (82)

Attention, then, is not just a matter of concentration on a specific targeted point, we could say that attention is also a spiritual and soulful matter, it is the phenomena of non-pecuniary relations that are impervious to the primary logic of exchange. We might speak of attention to mean the time involved in loving and caring for oneself as well as others, attention shows up as disposition to intuition, as the space from which a wish for climate alleviation or alleviation of its resulting anxieties grows. In short, attention has to do with the direction towards which our desires and aspirations flow. Thinking of the Anthropocene under these circumstances, the stakes of attention pertain to how we might become exposed to influences of moments that we call sublime, in the context of an attention ecosystem that militates rapaciously against our cognitive and attentive capacities. Relatedly, Balaji's film itself stages a serious and pressing question: in what ways does the "qualitative degradation of attention" (85) reflect the quantitative degradation of the environment?

One response comes via a historical map of the internet's broken infrastructure, such as the one Terranova traces, wherein we have displaced the initially enabling architecture of the internet with the self-aggrandizing platforms of

networked communication. Whereas the former might have denoted an aspirational network of inter-personal connectivity commensurate with space-time, the latter operates on a quite different register, and harnesses a combination of connectivity and computation to drive what she calls “Corporate Platform Complex” (CPC) (8). The term itself neatly describes the economic and cultural situation in which the ongoing transformation and displacement of “the internet” by platformed companies such as Meta, Apple, and X dominates. While the Internet proper was once an open and public place of possibility and newness, it is now a back-benched player, not quite off screen, but certainly surpassed by a networked attention ecology that is centered on predictability, preemption, and profitable metrics of a capitalist market (8). This is why, reflecting on his own unrest regarding the persuasion architectures of platforms, the computer scientist, Jaron Lanier, rejects the term “social networks” as a framework for viewing the platform complex, and suggest that they instead function, more directly, as “behavior modification empires”.

It’s clear from the situation outlined above that from the perspective of a techno media culture, one in which an unyielding platform economy rules, a type of cognitive saturation can compromise political organizing and preparation for whatever imagined and wished for futures we might create. This is because, as mentioned earlier, the question of attention is also a question of time, of the political and philosophical inventory that discloses the stakes of a vanishing present. To that extent, depicting subjects in various states of enthrallment with their devices, *Zombies* alludes to the acceleration of what Terranova would call “the systematic integration of communication and computation” (16) as it points to the seductions of Big Tech and the self-absorbing nature of networked platforms in the contemporary moment. Baloji himself makes cameo appearances throughout the film, often off center, as a silent observer of the different scenes of ordinary life in which the mobile device is ubiquitous. The recurring appearance of screens and mirrors hints at a deeper symbolic relation between the two; in one scene, a woman in a hair salon gets her hair platted, and as an intergenerational conversation between the older hair stylist and the younger customer ensues, the latter gleefully exclaims that her posting a picture of her hairstyle is expected to gain three thousand followers on Facebook, revealing how motivation by online aspirations affects the ordinary decisions we make in our lives offline.

From selfie sticks fervently grasped by partygoers, to the dis-location of Virtual Reality headsets on the dancefloor, the film also gives the impression that the device has become an almost natural extension of the body. Although with a distinct conception of the spectral dimension of a visceral zombie in mind, Michael J. Burke observes in *The Ethics of Horror* (2024) that the zombie is a site “through which alterity interacts as a prosthetic extension” of the living (146). If the device as extension of the hand renders the human a zombie, or implicitly a “death bound subject,” “the technoghost manifests itself in and through technological glitches” in that the zombie alterity is “a biological glitch, an undead, cancerous excrescence, posing the slack, blank death mask to a beleaguered humanity” (146). Yet the body

represented in the film, even at risk of being turned zombie, remains a site of self-possession, hence polyrhythmic dancing abounds, whether choreographed or inscribed in the swagger of spontaneous movements in the streets, all the characters respond performatively to the refrain that calls on them to “shake your arm to see if you’re alive and kicking.” A sedating digital imperative requires movement against it, so the film insists upon the vitality of life through dance and music. The film thus recenters the corporeality of biopolitics in the age of the digital, as if Baloji is drawing from a decolonial philosophy and tradition of being that aims to reconnect the separation between mind, body and place, a task for which he relies on rhythm.

On a sonic scale, the film stands out for its interweaving several musical traditions with a contemporary flair; hip-hop melts into electronic dance with modal funk along the way, some hints of jazz and the unmistakable Lingala vocal traditions. The latter, here, includes the use of Congolese guitar with its interlocking rhythms and colorful lead solo ornamentations. The Congolese guitar is hypnotic on the soundtrack “Glossina (Zombies),” transitioning us from the club scene to the zombie/master storyboard halfway through the film; it invites its listeners into a syncopated groove, where sublimity is confronted creatively in movement. Baloji raps in French and Lingala over the guitar, while guitarist Toms Ntale intones a lament, but in a celebratory tone, the soulful warning— “deadly is the routine.” With their bodies in constant motion and corresponding in dance, the subjects of the film are awake to their situatedness and environment, and exhibit more than the demoralizing resignation to simply being made zombies.

The film’s injunction for a “Fighting Spirit, spirit/” is made clear by the presence of three zombies midway through, one made of stretchy condoms, another made of recycled plastic bottled tops, and yet another, more obviously mechanic and metallic. The zombies are not predatory in their manner; they mingle convivially with the crowd and dance to the music of a brassy marching band even when huge flames threaten them. Thandi Loewenson notes that the ensemble of these zombies “speak[s] to the terrains of the struggle for a new world,” and, given the assorted material from which each of them is made, stand as a warning that “disruptions must strike at the heart of the established order and seek to redress entangled injustices; sexual, biological, economic, extractive and ecological” (15).

Describing the “liminality of the undead” that the film employs in the figure of the zombie, Nedine Moonsamy similarly points out that the “sublime biotechnological merging of man and machine” produces a situation in which the body becomes “a technology that can prevent annihilation, but cannot stall zombification” (198). The historical status of the zombie as a symbolic figure is not insignificant, since the zombie emerges in the early twentieth century, at least from this standpoint, to assuage the fears of a white American public in the wake of Haitian people’s emancipation (197). Thus, Moonsamy describes the zombie as “a placatory figure—a wish fulfillment of a docile (black) labor force that would never revolt, never demanded better working conditions, were insensitive to pain, and that could work day and night devoted entirely to carrying out the wishes of the zombie master” (197).

According to one deployment of the zombie trope, the zombie is a “futile, disempowered” figure, and as such its “use in social protest risks transforming a battle cry into a dirge” (Lauro 6). Both as a myth and in its material body, the zombie is pregnant with questions pertaining to its ambivalent ontological status, and can thus help us identify one prevalent expression of political subjectivity within a global technocene. To be sure, a tension persists in the zombie figure’s capacity to refuse; is the zombie still a zombie even though it is seemingly enlivened by a spirit of resistance against an appropriating force? If we take the film’s invocation of the tsetse fly, or being “asleep on your feet” and “sleeping with eyes wide open” the zombie may be emblematic of the type of metaphysical crisis that is occasioned by the presence of a living-dead, as Sarah Juliet Lauro argues in *The Transatlantic Zombie* (2015). Lauro gives the name “zombie dialectic” to this double posture of the zombie, figured as “the specter of the colonial slave and that slave’s *potential for rebellion*” (5). This stance, between slavery and resistance, renders the object status of the zombie undecided, which raises doubts about the potential of a living-dead body, a half-alive figure, to adequately mount a form of rebellion against the forces of global capitalism.



Figure 2: *Zombies*, 2019.

Perhaps the most striking sequence is that which depicts a procession taking place in the hectic streets and, perched atop a throne that is carried on the shoulders of four men, sits a man of superior rank holding a crucifix. A placard that reads “Bolo for President” is hoisted at the demonstration, while the political candidate surfs his crowd of supporters. In an all-white suit and leopard print hat, Bolo intermittently throws fistfuls of money at the cheerful crowd from the rickety and untenable position that he is propped up on, as again the refrain in the song, “because dead is the routine”—is rapped over the Afro-tech beats of the penultimate scene. It doesn’t end well for Bolo, as we soon see the body of the supreme leader, probably killed by

his erstwhile supporters, carried into a dump site to be disposed of amongst the waste and garbage of Kinshasa. The routine is deadly precisely because it is a routine, indicating that the ways of colonial servitude and exploitation which he represents cannot be “reduced, reused and recycled” for postcolonial times, he must be stopped at once and for all.

A Practice of Attention in the Anthropocene

Against the backdrop of a digital attention economy is a planetary situation, the Anthropocene, which in conventional accounts designates an epoch during which the disaster and deprivation of our planet is a result of human forces and activities. There are several reasons to question the discursive authority of “the Anthropocene,” not least because, as Jean-Baptiste Fressoz elucidates in his critique of the Anthropocene as a conceptual paradigm, “the Anthropocene is part of a larger Western Malthusian discourse: Once again, it blames the human species in general (or vague *Anthropos*, which is basically the same thing) for our predicament” (290). It harbors a primary conceptual error—the implication that our state of environmental collapse is indicative of “a threshold in environmental awareness” (297) and thus a natural, unavoidable evolutionary outcome of our otherwise human ways. If it does not quite properly isolate the specificity of the political reality of climate acceleration as arising from an implacable “technostructure oriented towards profit” (289), in its failure to foreground this point, the Anthropocene concept ignores that the environmental crisis is firstly a historico-political crisis.



Figure 3: *Zombies*, 2019.

Such a view of the Anthropocene is echoed in *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene* (2020), wherein Stefania Barca recharacterizes the notion of the Anthropocene by underscoring its asynchronous forms and pointing to its reach beyond the geological imprint of human domination and industry. I draw on the urgency of Barca's proposal, with its echo of Sylvia Wynter's decentering tactics, that we may obtain discursive clarity if we move the needle of ecocriticism away from the prevailing master narrative about "the human" to a counter narrative that underscores what Barca calls the "forces of reproduction"—those modes of attending to, indeed paying attention to and caring for the more-than human world (12). Unlike the forces of production—science, technology and industry—such forms of reproductive world building tend to go unnoticed and are often the labor of subjects who exceed the narrowly ascribed and normative category of the human (7).

Hence when we typically think of the Anthropocene as primarily inaugurated by a binary opposition between production and reproduction, the conventional dualism of this opposition over-determines the flow and movement of human relations in its throng (37). That is, the production and reproduction couplet doesn't become just one flawed conceptual apparatus among others, but becomes instead the master model of interpreting life in the wake of the Anthropocene (7–8). In order to establish the supremacy of Man, the production and reproduction binary enjoins and enfolds other dualisms such as male/female in the domain of gender, body/mind in the sphere of economic relations, human/nature in the ecological discourses, civilized/savage in the colonial relations of power as well as other dualisms that, cumulatively, encompass Euro-capitalist modernity (54). This is another reason why the notion of the Anthropocene as the name for what transpires under techno-capitalist globalization is something of a misnomer, because it obscures and covers over the real culprit of planetary degradation, namely, industrial modernity's imperative for growth and unfettered accumulation figured in the image of the white Euro-American Man. Barca states for this reason that "by privileging the forces of production as the key historical agency of the last 250 years, the Anthropocene storyline reflects this eco-modern masculinity, insofar as it hides and discounts as irrelevant the agency of reproductive subjects and the other-than-industrial ways of interacting with the biosphere" (37).

More than this historical revision of political economy, however, Barca arrives at the idea that the ecological crisis of today emerges not merely from the dominance of a model of life that unfolds on a production/reproduction spectrum, but from a fundamental cleaving of the forces of production from those of social reproduction. And insofar as this spectrum contains all the aforementioned dualisms within it, our vulnerability to ecocide comes from the resulting assertion of the supposedly immutable values of the "forces of production" over the more empowering "forces of reproduction," the latter of which exceeds the boundaries of *homo-economicus*. After all, those who suffer the effects of climate collapse are never in any way beneficiaries of capitalist plunder that accompanies the destruction of their lands, and are

categorically excluded from the world historical “human” as the terraforming *homo-economicus* that is centered in the concept of Anthropocene.

If an analytic that accounts for the subaltern’s experience of climate should welcome the utility of displacing “the human,” that would, alas, not change the corporeal and brute force to which the humans who reside on the continent are made to suffer. As Siddhartha Kara points out in his devastating ethnographic account of the illegal and dehumanizing cobalt mining in the DRC, *Cobalt Red: How The Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* (2022):

The journey into the mining provinces was at times a jarring time warp. The most advanced consumer electronic devices and electric vehicles in the world rely on a substance that is excavated by the blistered hands of peasants using picks, shovels, and rebar. Labor is valued by the penny, life hardly at all. (13)

Describing in shocking detail the atrocious, unrelenting and dangerous conditions of the mining fields in the provinces of Katanga and Lualaba, Kara observes unwaged and waged laborer all along the supply chain, but notes that at the very bottom, one finds what he describes as modern-day “slave-like conditions” (10). With no recourse to laws that could protect from the violence of illicit mining practices, the mining communities live in the long shadow of a colonial epistemology, where land is simply regarded by the market as a convenient zone of extraction. This logic of land as extraction establishes of a zone of non-being for its inhabitants, inside the state but outside the law, where law can never seriously nor adequately make their interests count within its preserve. For those made invisible by the digital economy in locations far away, their bodies are pressed to worked in absolutely unforgiving conditions and made disposable. This is very much in keeping with Cajetan Iheka’s mission to “unearth what happens behind the scenes of a global supply chain” in his study of contemporary film and photography’s sublime aesthetics, *African Ecomedia: Networked Forms, Planetary Politics* (6). He invites us to attend to the hard materiality of the digital economy, not merely its preferred and predominant idiom of cyberspace, so that we might reconsider how such dichotomies as “free labor” and “waged labor” are operative on the continent. Given the complications of such notions of free labor and waged labor, Iheka advocates for an analytic that is capacious enough to unsettle such binaries in the networked economy as they fail to capture the unseen of digital labor on the continent. We will be better off cultivating “a decolonial conceptualization that keeps together hardware and software as well as intellectual and manual labor” (8). This sort of double-edged analytic must be adequate to an account of media throughout the supply chain because media itself is not only a fundamentally relational and networked phenomena, but it is on the order of a pharmakon. This is why Iheka draws attention to the two-faced nature of media, while “media, broadly conceived, makes possible commutation and sustenance” it is “also equally tethered to social and ecological degradation in Africa from their production, distribution, consumption and disposal” (5).

As with subaltern groups in other regions of the planet, Africa and its ecological subjects are rendered invisible in the public consciousness of the very

countries that are the beneficiaries of the old imperial schemes of resource extraction. The idea that Euro-America owes an historically unpaid debt to the global south for the mineral resources that power its energy supply has been the subject of many serious investigations. Perhaps most pressingly, Walter Rodney's early discernment in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), which famously delineated the systematic asymmetries of colonial and neocolonial economic infrastructures of global capitalism. From this tradition, one might argue that the extractions of the digital economy pose an arguably even greater threat: unlike oil and gas—perishable consumer goods whose origins are hardly contested—the mobile device that the digital economy requires to continue apace conveniently obscures the earthly matter at its core. It is this mystification of the materiality of cyberspace, the quality of its opacity, that produces a vampiric reflexivity between the minerals extracted from the earth with the blood and sweat of Congolese miners that, in turn, generates and quite literally charges the devices of the global north. Beyond the power required for devices themselves, compounding areas of the network ecology also include service and data centers that impose their own energy demands.

Nonetheless, the degree of separation from the wretchedness of excavation sites is merely a recent iteration of an ongoing story, of Euro-American colonialist exploitation of naturally rich parts of the world while the actual inhabitants of those rich parts are left impoverished by a calculating and parasitic global economic order. The neocolonial devastation of the planet to which the film gestures is as a standard post-colonial script, one in which a former empire such as France, for example, continues to exploit its former African colonies in order to keep the lights on in its own citadels, often while espousing sovereignty on the world stage. In this example, France remains content to plunder, from Niger alone, let's say, more than one-fifth of the uranium needed to power the nuclear plants that generate the former's electricity. Similarly, though on a global and more diffuse level, we can consider the cobalt required for the rechargeable batteries that power the digital economy, grotesquely sourced in the Congo while the country itself remains systematically impoverished, with many of its inhabitants subjected to conditions of enslavement. The entanglement of the virtual "slave" of the digital platforms that feed on attention, and the unremitting toil and dehumanizing subjugation of the actually enslaved miners, lends a crude new texture to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "mechanized enslavement" to describe the runaway character of global capitalist production—the untamable beast that turns on and eats its own maker (Massumi 9). This trajectory of the self-destruction of capital has also been recently posited by Nancy Fraser in *Cannibal Capitalism* (2023), wherein "'capitalism' refers not to an economy, but to a type of society: one that authorizes an officially designated economy to pile up monetized value for investors and owners, while devouring the non-economized wealth of everyone else" (xv). In any event, to recall Kara's investigation of the demand and supply structure that underpins the state of abjection in the Congo mines, the planet is, so to speak, in our devices. To be sure, the individual and collective compulsion towards the device that is portrayed in *Zombies* is, in reality,

untenable without the systematized slavery of the artisanal miners whose presence in the film is marked by a curious absence.

Zombies also evokes a certain awe and terror in the face of a world fashioned in the image of neo-imperialism's uneven development; we are confronted with our own collective complicity for the part we play as reluctant or willing participants in sustaining the attention economy. Watching the multiple sequences come in and out of focus, the film mimics the inundation of scrolling mindlessly through the information stream. But taking the sequences of the film as a whole, we are called on to attend to the small and fleeting moments of the present, wherein attention is not waiting in the marketplace of consumer preemption, to be bought by corporations that aim to modify our behavior. *Zombies* invites us to rethink attention in the digital economy; attention as the practice and remembrance of being haunted by the unseen, unremunerated labor afoot in the global south, labor that powers the technical apparatuses that keep the digital economy thriving. Attention, then, is the embodied recognition that we are not so removed from the underbelly of a globalized technoculture, that we are the very reason why someone south of the equator, living and struggling on a desecrated portion of the planet, is exploited in order to accelerate the phasing in of the Green New Deals of the global north. Assuming a posture of aliveness towards the present may allow us to connect with ourselves and then to a social cognition of the struggles taking place in other geographies. One might then imagine the viscosity of a Congolese child thousands of miles away, made to rummage deep in a toxic mine pit with their bare hands in order to extract minerals marked for ascension up a supply chain that ends with an unboxing video on TikTok. The phone, as a device of the film, stands for the "ubiquity" of capital's overreach in social and imaginative life, but it also points to the ubiquity and normalization of the predation and violence that kills thousands and displaces several thousands more through neo-colonial landgrabs.

While the false premises of the Anthropocene are well documented, we might still ask how we come to understand not just the scale of devastation, but the range of affective intensities that climate disaster indexes—frustration and resentment, fear, anxiety, anger, pessimism or even denialism, gratitude for better days past and yet to come. But as I've suggested, critiques of the Anthropocene are more potent when they register the appropriation of potentiation by capital rather than lay blame at the feet of a universalized "human."

Identifying the challenges of the contemporary moment becomes more difficult when prevalent narratives of the Anthropocene downplay attention as crucial to politics. As several scholars unsettle the category of the Anthropocene for the ways that it mischaracterizes and even glosses over the primary source of planetary degradation might argue, an ideal signifier for the uninhabitable planet should openly disclose the underlying conditions of global techno-capitalism and its responsibility in reproducing precarity. For this reason, with a different orientation towards the Anthropocene, Brian Massumi asserts in passing that: "If a vector of becoming has swept through and come out the far side of the human adventure in the

form of the neoliberal-capitalist machinery of ontopower, then the label of the Anthropocene to designate the age we are entering is off the mark” (18). Ontopower is Massumi’s word for a certain kind of pre-emptive power as means to possibility, a power-to in relation to stimulus and response, quite different from a power-over that is common to contemporary politics (64). But we might nonetheless say, whether or not the driving forces of deprivation appear more clearly as a descriptive statement in other frameworks such as the Capitalocene, the crucial point is that the human that is centered in the Anthropocene is actually and ultimately, at the level of ontopower, not behind the wheel. This is because capitalism “now increasingly functions at the infra-individual level wherever capital flows—which is everywhere” (14) and can thus interfere “down to the affective level of felt potential, before life potentials have concretized in a determinate form of life, where life is as-yet emergent” (14). Instead of the presumed subject of the state, it is capitalism that sits in the driver’s seat of “the human’s” adventure into the future, reaching into and tinkering within the domain of “emergence.” Capital in the age of the digital thus arrogates to itself an even more fundamental power to condition subjectivity and temporality at an unprecedented level—it now draws its energies from virtually any prospective becoming.

Yet, despite the experience of capitalism as entirely surrounding and engulfing in the digital Anthropocene, a sublime picture to be sure, there is ever the possibility of creating new life-worlds. If there is no beyond capital, and if everything happens “within it,” there is simultaneously “a surfeit of potentials that are *immanent to capitalism’s field but not inside its system*” (Massumi 30). Notwithstanding the cultural intransigence of techno-culture undergirding contemporary global capitalism, there is still a ghostly matter in the presently unfolding narrative of the life of the internet, and it appears, as Massumi might say, in the form of an enduring “principle of unrest.” The unrest, here, is precisely that potentiality whose force of world-making is not immediately subsumed into a capitalist circuit, it lives rather as a permanent feature, a release valve in the networked structure. In that case, potential for a type of constructive and affirmative disorder resides in the ongoing movement and activity of life in a capitalist field, when a nascent and inchoate principle of unrest flashes up, and is given to its unimpeded conclusion, it can intervene and shock the techno-capitalist forcefield out of business-as-usual. As such, if there is a crucial task or “activity” for activism in a techno-capitalist milieu, it is firstly to affirm this principle, the unsubduable and wayward, even for its own sake. For potentials that mobilize counter-affects, “there is always something that continues across any capture” (101). If we understand the mobile device as a kind of mediator of the present unfolding, *Zombies’* distress about the appropriation of attention and free time in the digital economy exerts upon the viewers’ imagination a strong desire for an antidote to the dizzying images of the platformed network that is alluded to.

It will be important to practice attention, then, because such an antidotal element of potential materializes quietly, on the “micropolitical level,” it may also “happen at any scale” while it “passes unrecognized” since “it isn’t caught in the usual filters of activity and structures of understanding, because it embodies a singular

mode of movement that's too ghostly or slippery" (Massumi 102). No matter the form it takes as it comes into view, the risk is that the principle is itself exposed to capture or to appropriation by capital. We can think of the spontaneous eruption of a social movement that necessarily begins online with a morally inflected goal to challenge a norm, only to have the inputs of the participants' actions measured, monetized and sold off to the highest bidder, thereby neutralizing the manifestation of an emerging counter-power. But even in that seizure of potential in the throes of platform capitalism, there is still an emergent force that can be salvaged, which indicates a disposition to resistance and the very real possibility of breaking out of the prison house of corporate networked platforms.

Certainly, all the commentators of attention caution against the tragic narrative of the onward, uninterrupted growth that is implicit in the concept of Anthropocene, and embrace the search for an inherent antidote, one that is a constitutive element of the structure. In the case of Terranova, we find recourse in the power of "the ghost of the internet" that still "whispers of the possibility of new types of collective intelligence" (Terranova 12). At this point the condition of compulsory and mass enfoldment within the digital platform economy also undermines the remedy of withdrawal dispensed in Odell's account, since, as perennially monetized subjects of a techno-culture, even when we are still, we can never really "do nothing," we can never be in a state of un-productivity. Yet similar to Massumi's phenomenological disposition in which movement is always at play in the field of affectation, even when we are still and "not moving," Odell arrives at the idea that there exists, nevertheless, a small break that can be pried open in an attempt to escape the seemingly inescapable binds of an attention economy.

Although the forces of a techno culture bear upon us, the place for reclamation is in the hopeful recognition that even amidst an enveloped existence, resistance is both necessary and possible. In a way, the practice of attention embodies a certain principle of resistance that is captured by the epigraph; namely, Walter Benjamin's observation that "redemption preserves itself in a small crack in the continuum of catastrophe" (Odell V). This stands as a reminder that although we may be surrounded, one could equally affirm, then, that the planet is not actually in our devices. Odell identifies this fact as her own small crack, and demonstrates how we might cultivate a practice that deactivates the attention demands of a digital economy or networked platform that seeks to profit from our addiction to it. If there is a small opening in the form of "a crack in the continuum of catastrophe," it is firstly in the promise of the immediate relation to place and time that something like "Bioregionalism"—which emphasizes an attunement to "natural (rather than political) geographic boundaries," and is defined by "the human cultures that grow from the natural limits and potentials of the region" (Thayer 3). Given the preponderance of the earthly substance that is globally disseminated as well as the permeation of digital platforms in all spheres of life, from the mediascape to the public sector as well as the corporate world, it's hard to imagine with precision how the tenets of Bioregionalism would ensure that attention is not left defenseless against

the wolves of Silicon Valley. But one can be compelled by and advance the prospect of Bioregionalism as a mode of inhabiting the world, turning with care and attentiveness to the environment around us. While Odell prefers the birds and the wildlife sanctuaries of her location for cultivating a practice of attention, the utility of Bioregionalism is in the ability to situate us in the present, and thereby reassert the power of ecological time over the time of capital that is predicated on the notion of scarcity and that feeds on attention deficiency. There is benefit in thinking with a principle whereby concerted attention, and even a desire for it, may function itself as a semblance of counter power to the market. Intending an anti-capitalist attribute, the vitality in Bioregionalism is in the attentiveness it produces, an “awareness not only of the many life-forms of each place, but how they are interrelated, including humans” (xviii).

I have tried to show that the catastrophe of an aesthetic sublime that *Zombies* aims to capture appears in three forms, the violence and enslavement that takes place in the mines of the Congo, the out of sight subjugation that secures the continued reproduction of the same, and also in giving up of our attention or time such that we cannot avail ourselves to the work of building the shared commons of the future that the very concept of the sublime intends. Through its critical portrayal of the capture of attention, Baloji’s film asks us to seize opportunities to turn away from the seductions of psychotechnology and to instead turn toward the unfurling present, where power may yet be embodied.

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