

EPILOGUE: SHOCK, DÉTOURNEMENT,
AND THE T.A.Z.

An explosion is the most lasting thing in the universe. It leaves disorder, remembrance, room to move, a clear space. Joseph Conrad

"Shell shock," the affliction of a generation of young veterans, resulted from their proximity to literal explosions on the battlefield in World War I. It was exacerbated by a pervasive sense of vulnerability, by the gruesome and pathetic presence of the wounded, dying, and decaying dead. All of the senses were appalled; the imagination was racked and ravaged. After the war, shell shock rendered its victims "neurasthenic," liable to numbness, irrational fears, hallucinations, and nightmares. Sigmund Freud wrote about it, Walter Benjamin pondered the relationship of Freud's ideas to aesthetics, and Virginia Woolf's character Septimus Smith embodied it: "For now that it was all over, truce signed, and the dead buried, he had, especially in the evening, these sudden thunderclaps of fear."¹ But shell shock was not the first or the only modern anxiety that was caused by a sense of fear and vulnerability. Benjamin finds in Baudelaire a sensibility wounded by the ordinary shocks of urban life—sudden, loud, and ongoing noises, the dangers of traffic, etc. Two decades after Baudelaire's death,

during the heyday of anarchist violence, Paris in particular produced a new kind of shock. In his 1932 memoir Return to Yesterday, Ford Madox Ford wrote, “I remember Paris in 1892 as being absolutely paralyzed ... the rich and solid French families ... dared not go to theatres, to restaurants, to fashionable shops ... The catalogue of their [the Anarchists’] outrages reads like an improbable nightmare. They bombed the cafés where the rich took their apéritifs and the more costly restaurants; then they bombed the poor restaurants where their comrades had been arrested.”² Similarly, Henry Adams described himself as “an elderly and timid single gentleman in Paris who never ... found himself in the neighborhood of an official without calculating the chances of a bomb.”³ “Shock,” one of the dominant aesthetic strategies of modernism, is a dead metaphor whose particularly modern and material origins can be recovered if we consider the inventions of the modernist period—dynamite and its martial counterparts—and the way they were deployed.

On a spring day in 1950, as Parisians were attending Easter mass at Notre Dame Cathedral, four young men who called themselves Situationists made an unexpected intervention. Walking boldly into the pulpit, one of them began to read a denunciation of the Catholic Church and a proclamation of the death of God.⁴ Seventeen years later, Yippie activist Abbie Hoffman, accompanied by a group of like-minded friends, entered the visitors’ galleries of the New York Stock Exchange, from which they proceeded to throw dollar bills down at the startled (and to all reports, grasping) brokers and dealers. The Yippies later nominated and ran a pig for president of the United States and attempted (in

company with Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Lowell) to levitate the Pentagon. On Christmas Day in 1989, parents who had bought their children Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls were startled at the utterances coming from the dolls' voiceboxes. "Let's go shopping!" exclaimed the soldier doll in a high voice, while Barbie issued uncharacteristically menacing commands. A group calling itself the BLO (Barbie Liberation Organization) took responsibility, releasing a videotape that featured Barbie herself, who explained that the BLO had switched the voiceboxes in 300 dolls to contest gender-stereotyping in children's playthings.

Interventions like these are both political and cultural, provocative and amusing, subversive and entertaining. Unexpected and bizarre, they explode in the faces and intellects of their audiences. To those offended by such irreverence, they seem blasphemous, immoral, sick, or silly. Their perpetrators run some personal risk—of police arrest, or, in the case of the Situationists, serious assault. In the 1960s and 70s these interventions were described as "guerrilla theater." Decades earlier they were called "manifestations." And often such acts are characterized by their detractors as "anarchistic."

The reason for this characterization is manifold. First, because these interventions have been directed at centralized authority and received ideas. Secondly, because anarchism has always had an idealist streak, insisting on the necessity of transforming human consciousness, alienating us from the habits and prejudices we take for admirable and time-honored traditions. Thirdly, because with the advent of Zürich Dada, a modernist sense of irreverence, irony, and the absurd fused with an anarchist stance toward bourgeois hegemony. The physical

effects and metaphorical implications of the anarchist bomb became intellectual and psychological assaults under the avant-garde sign of “shock.”

In 1926, as the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti was making world news, an anarchist bomb went off in Paris: *Orpheus*, a play by the Surrealist Jean Cocteau. In it the protagonist's wife Euridice attacks her husband's poetry and refers to his "public" as "four or five heartless young brutes who believe you to be an anarchist." Orpheus responds: "It's necessary to hurl a bomb. It's necessary to start a scandal. It's necessary to have one of those storms that refresh the air."⁵ The artist must startle the audience, provoke outrage, clear the stale air of bourgeois convention and complacency. Cocteau's version of Orpheus is yet another example of a link between the poet and the anarchist, and dynamite is their common weapon.

It was among members of the avant-garde that the anarchist bomb was appropriated as an aesthetic strategy with political intentions and implications — a kind of shock therapy intended to shatter the seemingly natural façade of life under capitalism and the state. No longer was art's purpose or intention to please, entertain, instruct, seduce, and soothe its audience. The bored aristocrats chatting during the performance of a Haydn symphony are replaced by an outraged audience shouting, even assaulting one another. Their outrage would supposedly be superseded by more productive reactions—a startling recognition that the world could and should be changed, that the pursuit of wealth and status was indeed different from, and inferior to, the pursuit of happiness.

"Anarchy is Order!" anarchists have exclaimed, and to their opponents this has made no more sense than "Night is Day!" or "Death is Life!" Those in the radical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century were more likely to understand the anarchist aphorism. "The principle of anarchy in art should be welcomed," declared Thomas von Hartman in the Blaue Reiter Almanac, and other Expressionists agreed.⁶ Kandinsky's essay, "On the Problem of Form" (1912), which also appeared in the Expressionist anthology, unpacked it as follows:

Many call the present state of painting "anarchy." The same word is also used occasionally to describe the present state of music. It is thought incorrectly to mean unplanned upheaval and disorder. But anarchy is regularity and order created not by an external and ultimately powerless force, but by the feeling for the good. Limits are set up here too, but they must be internal limits and they must replace the external ones. These limits are also constantly giving rise to an ever-increasing freedom that, in turn, opens the way for further revelations.

Contemporary art in this sense is truly anarchistic; it not only reflects the spiritual standpoint already conquered, but also embodies the spirit as a materializing force, ripe for revelation.

[italics added]⁷

In Kandinsky's revision of anarchism, "revelation" replaces revolution. Kandinsky apparently belongs to the lineage of the Wagner-loving Russian "mystical anarchists," Gregori Chulkov and Alexander Blok. In another sense, Kandinsky's observations have a familiar ring. They echo the offhand remark of Wagner, quoted in Chapter 2, about a particular production of Parsifal being a result of "anarchy, in that everyone does what he wants, namely, the right thing."

Regulations should not be imposed from outside and above; instead, actions and responses should arise spontaneously from particular situations.

The aesthetic described here is one of self-organization. After a serious disruption in either nature or culture — a revolution, an explosion — new spaces open up, fresh patterns begin to emerge, new kinds of order. Contemporary anarchist Hakim Bey explains the relationship between chaos and order as follows: "Paradox: to embrace Chaos is not to slide toward entropy but to emerge into an energy like stars, a pattern of instantaneous grace—a spontaneous organic order completely different from the carrion pyramids of sultans, muftis, cadis, and grinning executioners."⁸ Bey's language is romantic, but his imagery is nonetheless suggestive—pyramids, or social hierarchies, are lethal; spontaneity is productive; order is not only a result of human planning but intrinsic to nature.

The avant-garde was generally attracted not to the cooperative, communal anarchism of Kropotkin but to the revolutionary anarchism of Bakunin. Different wings of the avant-garde appropriated different aspects of anarchism. The Futurists endorsed the violence of revolutionary anarchism, but they quickly succumbed to authoritarian fantasies and

military reveries and moved toward fascism. The Dadaists staged and performed their own versions of anarchist direct action at the Caberet Voltaire in Zürich from 1916 to 1918, perpetrating, according to Georges Hugnet, who witnessed these events, “a direct attack on the staid morality and sentiments of the public, which raged and swooned at such candor.”⁹ In Paris in 1921 the Dadaists and proto-Surrealists put the nationalist writer and ultra-bourgeois Maurice Barrès on trial at the Salle des Sociétés Savantes. Other interventions were more spontaneous and risky, such as shouting “Down with France!” at some respectable Parisian public forum. Surrealism would inherit some of Dada’s members, targets, and practices while enlarging the scope of its politics. Surrealism and anarchism, wrote Walter Benjamin in 1929, shared “a radical concept of freedom” —a concept, he added, that had been in eclipse since the days of Bakunin.

Rhetorical and Performative Dynamite: Dada

Dada had favorite targets: good taste and common sense; art in its formal concert-hall and museum venues; nationalism and war. Hugnet understood Dada as directly influenced by anarchism, writing in the early 1930s: “Dada profited from the ferment going on in Zürich, a haven for deserters, anarchists, and revolutionaries. Those who had taken refuge in Zürich were not themselves conscious of what was going on within them, of that force that in some of them was acquiring substance and becoming explosive.”¹⁰ But unlike those anarchists who perpetrated attentats against rulers and corporate officials—unlike Berkman

in his assault on Frick or Czolgosz in his assassination of McKinley—Dada did not attack its targets directly and physically, but obliquely and psychologically, disrupting their sense of what was normal, proper, predictable, and reasonable. Dada's strategic assaults and loose collectivities are akin to those described in anarchist theory.

"Nothing but a futile martyrdom," Hakim Bey observes, "could possibly result from a head-on collision with the terminal State, the megacorporate State, the empire of Spectacle and Simulation." Bey identifies and describes a collective strategy that depends upon the anarchist values of autonomy and mobility. He calls this strategy the "temporary autonomous zone" and says it can only be understood in practice, not defined in precise verbal formulas. "The T.A.Z.," he writes, "is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen." Among the T.A.Z. that Bey identifies are "pirate utopias," dinner parties, transitory oppositional websites, the Republic of Fiume, the Paris Commune.

Dada seems like an appropriate example of a T.A.Z. It formed on neutral ground in Zürich during World War I, dissolved to reform in Paris, Cologne, and Berlin, and finally disintegrated. It meets Bey's criterion that the T.A.Z. be interested in "successful raids on consensus reality, breakthroughs into more intense and abundant life."¹¹ Dada's raids and

breakthroughs took on forms like the following events at the Cabaret

Voltaire:

A trusting and hopeful audience, gathered together for an art exhibit or a poetry recital, was insulted beyond endurance. On the stage of the cabaret tin cans and keys were jangled as music until the enraged audience protested. Instead of reciting his poems, Serner placed a bunch of flowers at the feet of a dressmaker's dummy. Arp's poems were recited by a voice hidden in an enormous hat shaped like a sugar loaf. Huelsenbeck roared his poems in a mighty crescendo, while Tzara beat time on a large packing case. Huelsenbeck and Tzara danced, yapping like bear cubs, or in an exercise called "noir cacadou," they waddled about in a sack with their heads thrust in a pipe.¹²

Dadaists made metaphorical connections between their agendas and those of the anarchists. In the Dada Manifesto of 1918, Tzara declared, paraphrasing Bakunin, "Everyone must shout: there is great destructive, negative work to be done. To sweep, to clean. " ¹³ In the same manifesto Tzara described the aesthetic appropriation of the bomb: "Every page should explode," he wrote, "either because of its profound gravity, or its vortex, vertigo, newness, eternity, or because of its staggering absurdity, the enthusiasm of its principles, or its typography." ¹⁴ Tzara's Dada would

boggle both the eye and the mind. In 1919 the American Dadaist Man Ray and his friend Adolf Wolff published a magazine provocatively named TNT. Man Ray described it in an interview: "It was a political paper with a very radical slant. The words Communism and Bolshevism didn't exist then in America. TNT was a tirade against industrials, the exploiters of workers. We were all mixed up with the anarchist group. It was anarchism rather than anything else ... we were out and out anarchists."¹⁵ In the Dada Manifesto of 1920, Richard Hulseneck, like Tzara, associated contemporary art with explosion:

The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, the art which has been visibly shattered by the explosions of last week, which is forever trying to collect its limbs after yesterday's crash.¹⁶

Rather than escaping, or attempting to repress "the problems of the day," this art would consciously embrace them. Rather than aspiring to a seemingly organic unity, this art would relish its own violent fragmentation.

Anarchist ideas could also be appropriated in other ways, without reference to the bomb. In 1917, in the Galerie Dada, another anarchist, Hugo Ball, gave a talk on Kandinsky, quoting the above passage from the

painter's essay on form. Ball began with some aphorisms by Nietzsche: "Gott ist tot. Eine Welt brach zusammen. Ich bin Dynamit" ("God is dead. A world broke apart. I am dynamite").¹⁷ He proceeded to compare Kandinsky's aesthetic of anarchy to the ideas of political anarchists:

The idea of Freedom is quite marked in Kandinsky, carried over into the domain of art. What he says about anarchy is reminiscent of sentences in Bakunin and Kropotkin, only that he applies the concept of freedom very spiritually to the aesthetic.¹⁸

Hugo Ball did not entirely share the political identity and sensibility of Man Ray, Huelsenbeck, and Tzara. In his diary he describes anarchism in disapproving and stereotypical terms. "I have examined myself carefully," he wrote in his diary. "I could never bid chaos welcome, throw bombs, blow up bridges, and do away with ideas. I am not an anarchist. The longer I am away from Germany, the less I am likely to become one."¹⁹ Yet Ball wrote a "Bakunin breviary" that his publisher reneged on publishing, and in the following passage of the diary he ponders Proudhon:

Proudhon, the father of anarchism, also seems to have been the first who recognized the stylistic consequences. I am

curious to read something by him. If one recognized that the word was the first government, this leads to a fluctuating style which avoids the words of/for things and evades concentration. The single syllables and sounds win back their autonomy.²⁰

The passage suggests that "words of/for things" is a kind of representation—like representative government—that both anarchists and their bohemian fellow-travelers resist. Ball's remarks provide an anarchist rationale for Dadaist practices like simultaneous poems and sound poems. Liberation is linguistic; individual syllables and sounds are comparable, it is implied, to individual human beings, who also need to win back their autonomy. Ball's version of anarchy is obviously remote from Proudhon's, with its specific economic proposals. Brecht's dismissal of the Expressionists seems applicable in this context: "such people had merely freed themselves from grammar, not from capitalism."²¹

Elsewhere in his diary, however, Ball assessed the appeal of anarchism more thoughtfully. In a long entry written on June 16, 1915, he defined anarchism as "a belief in the universal, natural, divine childhood, a belief that an unconstrained world will produce the maximum yield."²² Condemning the State for giving itself "metaphysical airs" that are in contradiction to its "economic and moral practices," Ball concludes that "no sensible man" would reject life in some tropical paradise for "the

moral confusion and catastrophic destruction that centralizing systems and systematized work have caused everywhere” [italics added].²³

Surrealism, Shock, and Violence

Surrealism, the longest-lived and perhaps most famous wing of the avant-garde, continued in the Dadaist anti-tradition of shock and spontaneous disruption. By infusing anarchism with the spirit of Lautréamont, Jarry, and Rimbaud, the Surrealists invented new modes of anarchy — fleeting, modern, and contingent, the anarchy of the psyche that is the Freudian unconscious, the anarchy of the iconoclast smashing social codes and conventions. Strolling the streets of Paris, the Surrealists went in quest of startling coincidences and improbable moments when the banal and mundane would vanish in favor of the dreamlike and the uncanny. If for other modernists, the psychological, political, or philosophical dimension of experience took precedence over the others, for the Surrealists, they interpenetrated — Freudian theory was important because of what it had to say about the unconscious; Marx was significant because political liberation was a part of human emancipation; and anarchist thinkers were inspiring because they celebrated spontaneity, freedom, and revolution.

Like Dada, the Surrealists were full of rhetorical dynamite; Robert Desnos described them as unified by "something that resembled the fellowship of those who are going to blow up a city in a spirit of revolt."²⁴

As it is in Bely, Adams, and Chesterton, the bomb implicit in all these metaphors is a mental bomb, a violent disruption of received ideas, logic, and common sense. Its intended effect is to liberate the self from indoctrination by authoritarian premises, to emancipate consciousness, and expose the constructedness of the social.

Because he is the principal and most prolific theorist of Surrealism, André Breton's work provides the richest source for revolutionary, anarchist, and libertarian rhetoric. Breton suggests a variety of strategies, ranging from automatic writing to random acts of violence, to achieve the end he promotes: a general emancipation from antiquated and oppressive ways of thinking, feeling, and living. "We hold the liberation of man," he declared, "to be the *sine qua non* condition of the *liberation of the mind*" [italics original].²⁵ This task necessitates a liberation *of* the self, as well as a liberation *from* the self, and this liberation could be catalyzed in a variety of ways—by intoxicating drugs like hashish or by passionate experiences like romantic love, events that Walter Benjamin describes as "profane illuminations" of the everyday. But human liberation could also be catalyzed more painfully; the role and effects of shock and violence preoccupy both Breton and Benjamin.

In the 1939 essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin appropriated a Freudian hypothesis and applied it, as he acknowledged, to "situations far removed from those which Freud had in mind." In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud had speculated that the traumatic neurosis,

such as the "war neurosis" or shell shock, is "a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli."²⁶ The neurosis is most likely to occur, Freud conjectured, if no physical injury is sustained and if the shock bypasses consciousness to afflict the unconscious mind. Not only modern warfare but also modern urban life inflicts traumatic shocks upon the human being. "Moving through this traffic," Benjamin explains, "involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions."²⁷ Shock has, for Benjamin, an applicability to modern aesthetics; photography is one of the newer art forms to participate in the aesthetic of shock: "The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were."²⁸ And if the camera inflicts a single shock upon the moment, "in a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle." Even older art forms, like lyric poetry, are affected and transformed by the shocks of modernity. Benjamin refers to "the subterranean shocks by which Baudelaire's poetry is shaken" and to Valéry's remarks about "surprise."²⁹ He speculates that in the decades after Baudelaire, people became more accustomed to the physical shocks of the metropolis, developing both a partial immunity to physical shocks and a complacency about the social order.

It is the unconscious, Benjamin suggests, drawing on Freud, that must register these shocks in order to render them fruitful for poetry and the other arts. Like concealed sticks of dynamite with a trigger or timing device, these stored experiences wait to be tripped. Thus they can be

reactivated, rather as the past is abruptly and unexpectedly recaptured for Proust's characters in the taste of a tea-soaked madeleine or the notes of a particular violin sonata. Because shock involves discontinuities, it is allied with randomness, another aesthetic desideratum of the avant-garde — paper bag poems, word collages and salads, an erratic parade of images, inducing either pleasure or confusion, depending on readers' attachment to bourgeois conventions of thought and art, on their ability to tolerate and appreciate surprise and novelty. The unconscious was also crucial for André Breton, another admirer of Freud. It has not been colonized by the banalities and limitations of social life; it is the origin of all imagination and all desire.

Benjamin concludes the Baudelaire essay with an important insight: "He [Baudelaire] indicated the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock. He paid dearly for consenting to this disintegration — but it is the law of his poetry" [italics added]. The disintegration of the aura: this is what the avant-garde, as Peter Bürger has argued, wanted as well. If shock destroys the aura, then it is the appropriate weapon of revolutionary artists. Herbert Read also urged that the established bourgeois ideals in the arts be destroyed. It was the bourgeois immunity to shock that both avant-garde manifestations and the anarchist bomb were intended to assault—targeting a sophisticated ennui in both art and everyday life.

Shock is thus directly linked to explosion, and explosion is, less transparently, linked to another concept dear to Walter Benjamin, that of melancholy. In his essay on Surrealism Benjamin writes that Breton and Nadja

are the lovers who convert everything that we have experienced on mournful railway journeys . . . on Godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian quarters of the great cities, in the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment, into revolutionary experience, if not action. They bring the immense forces of "atmosphere" concealed in these things to the point of explosion [italics added].³⁰

This evocative passage suggests that Nadja and Breton work as catalysts, as fuse and fire, on the raw and politically combustible material of urban dreariness, working-class alienation, and human misery. In a passage that seems indebted to this one of Benjamin, Theodor Adorno comments on the suicide of the protagonist at the end of Wedekind's Spring Awakening: "as dusk settles over the city in the far distance, the unspeakable melancholy of the river landscape is expressed." It is, one might speculate, an effect of reification that urban and suburban vistas seem to express

feelings that human beings can no longer articulate — that Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy" has become a revealed truth of modernist experience.

If Breton is a Bakunin of the surrealist unconscious, championing the spirit of revolt over dutiful proletarian labor and good bourgeois behavior, Nadja is an Emma Goldman of the imagination, a nonconformist who, like Goldman, is locked up for her refusal to accept the normative as healthy and desirable. An observation Hugo Ball made in his diary seems to anticipate Breton here; Ball wrote of recovering a lost world "that is liberated in art by unrestrained enthusiasm, but in the lunatic asylum is freed by a disease. The revolutionaries I mean are to be sought there, rather than in the mechanized literature and politics of today."³¹ A person who is liberated from conventional modes of thought, perception, and behavior is likely to be regarded as a lunatic and incarcerated. Such people, in their freedom from "mechanization," are more capable of revolt than the dutiful functionaries commuting on the métro.

Breton concludes Nadja with a similar observation about mad revolutionaries. "Human emancipation," he writes,

conceived finally in its revolutionary form ... remains the only cause worth serving. Nadja was born to serve it, if only by demonstrating that around himself each individual must foment a private conspiracy, which exists not only in the imagination ... but also — and much more dangerously

— by thrusting one's head, then an arm out of the jail —
thus shattered—of logic, that is, out of the most hateful of
prisons.³²

This exhortation provides a good example of the avant-garde's kinship with, and revision of, anarchism: the anarchist hatred of prisons, criticized from William Godwin on, becomes the surrealist hatred of instrumental reason and any restrictive form of rationality.

In the essay, "The Destructive Character," Benjamin implicitly addresses Bakunin's claim that destruction and creation are two sides of one coin. The character Benjamin describes is a variant of Conrad's natural anarchist or natural revolutionary, someone predisposed by temperament to revolt and violence. "The destructive character does his work," Benjamin writes, "the only work he avoids is being creative."³³ This avoidance is not entirely negative, however; the destructive character is endlessly conscious of potential, of history, of impermanence, and this very consciousness is a virtue: "What exists he reduces to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it."³⁴ As someone who reduces the world to rubble, the destructive character is a bomber. Negative in himself, he nonetheless clears spaces that permit new structures and positive transformations.

In a famous passage written in response to these ideas of Benjamin, Adorno criticized what he saw as anarchist tendencies in Benjamin's own thinking:

It would . . . border on anarchism to revoke the reification of a great work of art in the spirit of immediate use-values. 'Les extremes me touchent' [Gide], just as they touch you — but only if the dialectic of the lowest has the same value as the dialectic of the highest . . . Both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change . . . Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one to the other, either as bourgeois romanticism of the conservation of personality and all that stuff, or as the anarchistic romanticism of blind confidence in the spontaneous power of the proletariat in the historical process — a proletariat which is itself a product of bourgeois society. To a certain extent I must accuse your essay of this second romanticism. [italics added] ³⁵

If the "reification of a great work of art" refers to Benjamin's notion of the "aura," then destroying the aura with "shock" would be an anarchist act. This destruction would be, Adorno thinks, pointless. Both the work of art

and the proletariat are products of bourgeois economic and social organization; each is a mangled version of the “freedom” Benjamin praises in the ideas of Bakunin and in Surrealism. One of these positions is that of the “bourgeois romantic” who wants only to preserve the past; the other extreme is occupied by the spontaneous but vulgar “destructive character,” who is presumably limited by his proletarian upbringing.

Despite his irritation with some of Benjamin's ideas, Adorno elaborates in his Aesthetic Theory upon his colleague's notions of “shock” and “explosion.” Toward the beginning of the text, he writes: “Scars of damage and disruption are the modern's seal of authenticity; by their means, art desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same; explosion is one of its invariants. Antitraditional energy becomes a voracious vortex.”³⁶ Explosion is thus constitutive of modern art, a consequence of its revolt against an earlier traditional aesthetics that required art to possess a formal unity and perceptible order. Adorno further speculates that because an artwork necessarily destroys its own imagerie, its own aesthetic premises, “art is profoundly akin to explosion.” Picasso's “*Demoiselles d'Avignon*,” Duchamps's “*Fountain*,” music that “emancipates the dissonance,” Surrealists and Dadaist manifestations — all of these are infernal machines primed to detonate. They have no aura; they are not descendants of religious icons; on the contrary, they make worshipful appreciation impossible. Thus, “the shocks inflicted by the most recent artworks are the explosion of their appearance.”

André Breton shared Benjamin's ideas about the redemptive possibilities of shock, explosion, and destruction. In the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), Breton invokes Bakunin, the anarchist most often associated with the advocacy of violent revolution, writing with Hegelian clarity: "how absurd it would be to define Surrealism solely as constructive or destructive: the point to which we are referring is a fortiori that point where construction and destruction can no longer be brandished one against the other" [italics added].³⁷ Breton then articulates his position in the most radical terms:

Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule, and that is why it still expects nothing save from violence. The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in the crowd with his belly at barrel level.³⁸

In their affirmation of random violence and their hostility to those content with the status quo, these sentiments recall Émile Henry's 1890s

bombings of Paris cafés and restaurants, also intended to shatter bourgeois complacency and to assault, in Henry's words, "all those who are satisfied with the existing order, who applaud the acts of the government and become its accomplices."³⁹ But unlike Henry, Breton and the other Surrealists never physically attacked people or property. Breton's advocacy of violence functions as a rhetorical gesture, and perhaps in that sense it is sufficiently shocking.

In its rebellion against planned design, André Breton's convulsive beauty, as a form of shock, belongs to the aesthetics of positive feedback and self-organization. Positive feedback is a form of energy that causes explosion. Self-organization is one of its results.

Positive Feedback and Self-Organization

More recent scientific theories and discoveries may provide demonstrations of avant-gardists and anarchists' shared optimism about the radical transformation of systems and thus new evidence for their faith in beneficial, self-organizing patterns. The scientific understanding of chaos and order changed in the 1980s as a result of interrelated concepts known variously as dynamical systems theory, complexity theory, and chaos theory. As Katherine Hayles explained in her 1990 book Chaos Bound, chaos was transvalued — reconceptualized as positive rather than negative, as the progenitor of order, not as its binary opposite, as a presence,

not an absence. A chaotic system is not one that is falling apart but one that is rich in information and new possibilities.

As the anarchy-is-order slogan suggests, anarchists had already argued for this transvaluation. By insisting upon the dependence of order upon disorder, the creative possibilities of destruction, and the transformative potential of positive feedback processes, anarchists displayed an imaginative understanding of what the culture assumed were negative categories. Those anarchists who celebrated the potential of the dynamite bomb to catalyze the revolution were anticipating a doubling of the positive feedback effect — the effects of explosion itself, and in the revolutionary enthusiasm it would surely inspire among the oppressed.

There is a longstanding relationship between scientific thought and social theory. As Murray Bookchin points out: "in almost every period since the Renaissance the development of revolutionary thought has been heavily influenced by a branch of science, often in conjunction with a school of philosophy." ⁴⁰ Analogies between science and social life can, of course, be risky and are easily overextended, but the anarchist use of natural paradigms seems defensible as a way to find some material instance of alternatives to traditional economic and social hierarchies. Kropotkin's evidence of cooperation and mutual aid among social species countered Spencer and Huxley's claims about competition and the "survival of the fittest." If revolutionary thinkers avoided all appeals to the natural world, or — in order to avoid the accusation of "nostalgia" — the historical past, they would find themselves proposing improbable utopias, "no-places. "

Anarchists had long refused to predict in detail the postrevolutionary future and thus dictate to that future. Emma Goldman rejected the notion that anarchism represented “an iron-clad program”; instead “methods must grow out of the economic needs of each place and clime, and of the intellectual and temperamental requirements of the individual” [italics added].⁴¹ In a 1971 essay entitled “Spontaneity and Organization,” Bookchin argued for the kind of spontaneous social uprisings long favored by anarchists. Like Benjamin and the Surrealists, he stresses the role of the unconscious:

The explosive character of revolution, its suddenness and utter unpredictability, can be explained only as the eruption of these unconscious changes into consciousness, as a release of the tension between unconscious desires and consciously held views in the form of an outright confrontation with the existing social order [italics added].⁴²

Bookchin’s metaphors in this passage suggest a version of the dynamite bomb, and his emphasis on the unconscious, desire, and on acts of rebellion expose a kinship between his ideas and those of André Breton. The passage invokes the process scientists refer to as “positive feedback,” which is one way that order emerges from apparent disorder. In the chapter “Explosions and Spirals” of *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986), Richard Dawkins defines positive feedback as a mode of exponential increase: a “self-reinforcing process” with its own “self-sustaining

momentum ... best understood by comparison with its opposite, negative feedback [which is] the basis of most automatic control and regulation,"⁴³ such as the Watts steam engine. By contrast:

positive feedback processes have an unstable, runaway quality. Slight initial perturbations are increased, and they run away in an ever-increasing spiral, which culminates either in disaster or in an eventual throttling down at some higher level due to other processes ... In chemistry, the typical positive-feedback process is an explosion. [italics added]⁴⁴

Positive feedback has been falsely associated with "things going wrong," assert the authors of a 1986 book entitled Positive Feedback in Natural Systems. Actually, positive feedback loops move a system from one steady state to another. When a star is overwhelmed by positive feedback loops, it becomes a supernova. The Big Bang was the ultimate example of positive feedback and its positive, creative effects. The phenomenon is observable in a variety of systems, organic and inorganic, such as epidemics and sudden increases of population — population "explosions" — and ecosystems in, for example, the relationships of predator and prey. As scientists recognize, positive feedback bears a relationship to social groups and systems as well. From its processes we derive the metaphors of "powder keg" and "flashpoint" to describe geographical areas of explosive

political tension like Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and the Balkans. In other human cultural contexts, positive feedback is at work when a new book or pop song hits “critical mass for take-off.” Political uprisings, riots, social revolutions — all of these work by positive feedback mechanisms.

In The Education, Henry Adams pondered the effects of positive feedback in relation to the expansion of scientific knowledge. The explosive increase of human knowledge would inevitably, he thought, accompany technological increases in energy production, and would be subject to the same law, which he called the “law of acceleration.” “At the rate of progress since 1800,” he speculated, “every American who lived to the year 2000 would know how to control unlimited power. He would think in complexities unimaginable to an earlier mind” (EHA 496-97). By moving a system from one state to another, positive feedback makes possible new forms of organization that arise from, or even within, chaos.

Anarchists have advocated such concepts for over a century. Order arises, Bakunin explained, precisely because there is no single, central authority who dictates to the natural world. Order results from change, from a responsiveness to particular and shifting circumstances:

If order is natural and possible in the universe, it is entirely because that universe is not governed by any system thought up in advance and imposed by a supreme will. The

theological hypothesis of a divine legislation leads to an evident absurdity, and to the negation not only of all order, but of nature itself. Natural laws are real only in so far as they are inherent in nature, that is to say in so far as they are fixed by no other authority. These laws are only simple manifestations or rather continual modalities of the development of things and of the combinations of varied, transitory but real facts. Together, this constitutes what we call 'nature.' Human intelligence and science observed these facts and controlled them experimentally, and then reassembled them into a system and called them laws. But nature itself knows no laws. It acts unconsciously, representing in itself the infinite variety of phenomena, appearing and repeating themselves according to necessity. That is why, thanks to this inevitability of action, universal order can exist and in fact does exist.⁴⁵

Bakunin's companion on the barricades of Dresden, Richard Wagner, made some compatible observations in The Artwork of the Future. Max Nordau, who called Wagner a degenerate and an anarchist, quotes them as evidence for his accusations. All human beings have one common and lasting need, Wagner says, which is happiness. Other needs are temporary and arise only in response to particular situations. To achieve these particular needs, people may join together

to work collectively. "These associations will change, will take on another form, dissolve and reconstitute themselves as the needs themselves change and appear."

⁴⁶ Wagner's formulation here suggests a relationship between self-organization and anarchist affinity groups, which form and dissolve in response to particular situations. Like Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Nordau quotes Wagner's 1882 advice about the staging of Parsifal at the Bayreuth festival, presumably self-organization in action: "anarchy, in that everyone does what he wants, namely, the right thing." ⁴⁷ Similar also is Kandinsky's statement, quoted earlier: "Anarchy is regularity and order created not by an external and ultimately powerless force, but by the feeling for the good."

Collective modes of musical improvisation are examples of self-organization. "When systems are at the edge of chaos," writes Frank Barrett in an article on jazz, "they are most able to abandon inappropriate or undesirable behaviors and structures and discover new patterns that are more appropriate to changing circumstances." ⁴⁸ During such performances, spontaneity, diversity, innovation, and risk are valued over stability, predictability, certainty or stasis. Improvisational and democratic musical ensembles—not only jazz ensembles but also jam bands like the late Grateful Dead and Phish—might well be examples of anarchist affinity groups in action, which Bookchin defines as "an ethical union of free, morally strong individuals who can directly participate in consensual rule because they are competent and live in a mutual recognition of each other's competence." ⁴⁹ During an uprising, Bookchin says, affinity groups operate as "catalysts" or "energy centers": "They affirm not only the rational but the joyous,

the sensuous and the aesthetic side of revolution. They affirm that revolution is not only an assault on the established order but also a festival in the streets.”⁵⁰

In explaining his concept of the T.A.Z. Hakim Bey agrees: "Participants in the insurrection invariably note its festive aspects... the uprising is like a saturnalia which has slipped loose (or been forced to vanish) from its intercalary interval and is now at liberty to pop up anywhere or when."⁵¹ Bey alludes to the role of music in anarchist history, citing "the madcap Republic of Fiume" in which Gabriel D'Annunzio and an anarchist colleague "declared *music to be the central principle of the State*" (italics original).

Critical Mass

Funded by the invention of dynamite, the Nobel Prize continued its bizarre relationship with bombs and explosives. Madame Curie, whom Henry Adams described as having "thrown the metaphysical bomb she called radium upon the desk," was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1903 and in Chemistry in 1911. Curie was one of those scientists who did not believe that the atom was indissolvable, a belief later demonstrated by Enrico Fermi, another Nobel laureate. In a discovery that made possible the American atomic bomb, Fermi supervised the first nuclear chain reaction.

The atomic bomb explodes when fissile material reaches "critical mass," a term designating the point at which the accumulation of a certain amount of

uranium-235 sets off a chain reaction. The metaphor of “critical mass” has been appropriated by another group of people to describe a very different practice.

In the streets of Beijing, it has long been “intersection-crossing etiquette” for vehicles to advance when a sufficient number of them have accumulated. A foreign observer and cyclist dubbed this cultural practice “critical mass.” In August of 1992, commuters at a meeting of the San Francisco Bike Coalition, who individually felt endangered by buses and cars, decided to band together and ride home from work collectively. Like Beijing vehicles, many of which are bicycles, they would dominate by the strength of their numbers and thus protect one another from automobile traffic.

In 1992, about 60 cyclists gathered in downtown San Francisco to participate in the first Critical Mass ride. Rides soon became a regular event, taking place on the last Friday of the month at 6 p.m. A year later, Critical Mass rides were attracting as many as 600 cyclists, and the practice had been adopted by people all around the world. In the year 2000 websites announced Critical Mass rides in university towns like Eugene, Oregon, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Freiburg, Germany, as well as in such major cities as Berlin and Paris. In their leaderlessness, spontaneity, and attitude of cheerful protest, Critical Mass rides are exemplary of anarchist theory and practice.

The Critical Mass movement is an instance of Bookchin’s “festival in the streets,” the “aesthetic side of revolution.” In particular, it is an excellent contemporary example of the T.A.Z. As flyers explain, the events have no leader, no fixed plan, yet they demonstrate that “organic systems do not lead to chaos but

rather to a festive, celebratory atmosphere.” The gatherings typically inspire a variety of reactions from pedestrians and motorists — amusement, fury, envy. Many riders are regular commuters, demonstrating for a more bike-friendly environment; some desire the protection of other cyclists while riding home from work; others want to show how feasible, healthy, and ecological it is to move through the city on your own power; and some people join the ride for the fun of it. Fun is, in fact, a desideratum of the event. “Your pleasure is more inspirational and subversive than any posturing,” one Critical Mass flyer states, advising participants not to take a self-righteous attitude toward drivers.

The above quotations are from polemics written by Chris Carlsson, a San Francisco activist who proposed the first Critical Mass ride. In his “Critical Massifesto” Carlsson theorizes the rides as “an antidote to the elimination of public space,” a return to face-to-face encounters, and a disruption of the “univocal, self-referential spectacle” (a reference to Guy Debord). In subsequent polemics, Carlsson describes Critical Mass as an “organized coincidence” that has “pried open a unique public, political space.” Although cycling is normally an individual experience, “when we ride together in Critical Mass, we transform our personal choices into a shared, collective repudiation of the prevailing social madness,” i.e., consumption, pollution, conventional transportation, and regulation of all kinds.⁵² Relatively brief in duration, oblique, flexible, and humorous in their confrontational strategies, critical mass rides seem like appropriate examples of Bey's temporary autonomous zone.

Critical Mass has necessitated carefully considered yet impromptu responses to automobile drivers. Flyers advise riders about dangerous intersections. Riders are ready with tactics intended to avoid conflicts and accidents. If the group begins to spread too thin, cars might head into the gap, so riders alert each other about regrouping, slowing down, and so forth. Some riders carry friendly signs to disarm irate motorists. If a red light threatens to divide a group, these riders take position to usher slower riders through the intersection and thank motorists for waiting.

Like other street festivals, such as the outdoor block parties in hippie neighborhoods in the 1960s, Critical Mass rides have prompted official condemnation and even police crackdowns. In a humorous response to this and in keeping with their avant-garde legacy, the April, 1994, Critical Mass ride toured the donut shops of San Francisco. In a culture that is dedicated to work, shopping, and the cultivation of “adult” demeanor, attire, and modes of transportation, especially downtown during the workweek, crackdowns might well be reactions of official anxiety about spontaneous, joyful, unpredictable collective activities. As Carlsson puts it, “it frightens them [city authorities and conservative spectators] to see thousands of people jubilantly and publicly rejecting the rules and assumptions they see as the thin line separating civilization from chaos. Those who feel at home in the amnesiac, intimidated way of life are right to see a threat in the eruption of a free space.” This is the “room to move, a clear space” that Conrad describes as the aftermath of an explosion.

The bicycle, popularized during the modernist period, might ultimately be a more appropriate and persuasive political emblem for anarchism than the bomb. The bicycle confers upon its rider both autonomy and mobility. It is quiet, relatively inexpensive, and human-powered. The cyclist is able to move with surprising freedom across urban grids, to avoid traffic jams and to park almost anywhere, an individual who moves in close relation to the social and the out-of-doors, rather than in an enclosed space. A cyclist can also join a collectivity – a riding group, a cycling advocacy organization. Bike messengers have formed coteries around anarchist principles. There is clearly a connection between progressive politics and cycling-friendly cities like Berkeley, California, Portland, Oregon, and Madison, Wisconsin, and Amsterdam. The idea of public, shared bicycles left around a city for anyone to use — the white bikes of the Dutch Provos in the 1960s, the yellow bikes of Portland, Oregon, in the 1990s, and the yellow bikes of contemporary Finland — are expressions of anarchist ideas.

By exploding centrality and thus destroying the very locus of authority, the dynamite bomb and its metaphorical counterparts make what Conrad called a “clear space” for the alternative anarchist social values of autonomy and mobility. Autonomy is attained when one is subject neither to an authoritarian regime nor to an oppressive employer, domineering spouse, or the hegemony of consumer culture, with its prerouted channels for desire. The fixity and rigidity of the old social structure, with its hereditary hierarchies, is eradicated. A new kind of mobility is encouraged: not the social climbing of the past—the ascent from obscurity of ambitious historical figures like Napoleon or Andrew Carnegie—but

the "rootless cosmopolitanism" advocated by Hakim Bey. Anarchist mobility can be solitary, as in Rimbaud's departing France for North Africa, or social, like the Beats on the road, but it is no longer solely a male privilege. The nuclear family in its tract house is superseded by the wandering band, the affinity group. The "intoxication of sheer presence" replaces the second-hand experiences of mediation and representation. Humor, wit, and a sense of the absurd are all ingredients of everyday life, dismantling from the get-go any undue self-regard or conviction of personal authority. Spontaneity and flexibility supercede schedule and routine.

Of course, capitalism is also destructive; it too makes clear spaces. When Henry James returned to the United States after a long absence, he was appalled at the destruction of old Boston landmarks and neighborhoods. Corporations obliterate splendid old houses—known as "tear-downs" in contemporary real estate jargon—and bulldoze rain forests. The destructive energies of capitalism are mobilized by the desire for profit; shareholders, not citizens, are the primary beneficiaries of its successes. Like others on the left, anarchists would object that the proponents of capitalism celebrate freedom, but only in relation to the free market; champion individualism but are indifferent to the fate of actual individuals; trumpet social mobility but only of the hierarchical, corporate-ladder-climbing variety.

With all of this in mind, we can reconsider what anarchists have meant in declaring, "Anarchy is Order!" They were not trafficking in paradoxes; they were expressing in a slogan the espousal of another kind of order — one that could be

considered in relation to both aesthetics and human organization. "Anarchy is Order," like Bakunin's "the act of destruction is also a creative act," expresses the fundamentally different philosophical stance of anarchism, which has insisted that groups without leaders, margins without centers, and unplanned spontaneous eruptions of various kinds can produce a superior level of order —not an authoritarian and oppressive one that issues from a center disseminated by a hierarchical organization like a corporate or state bureaucracy, but an emancipatory, flexible, adaptable social organism that can readily respond to nuance, exigency, and individual circumstance. "Spontaneity," Murray Bookchin has declared, "yields its own liberated forms of social organization."⁵³

Positive feedback and self-organization are alternatives to the fixed, authoritarian, and centralized modes of social and aesthetic organization that anarchists oppose. The real "dynamite" of anarchism is not a compound of nitroglycerine and kieselguhr, or political assassinations, or the sporadic destruction of corporate property by black-clad demonstrators, but an explosive mixture of strategic anti-authoritarianism, humorous irreverence, and playful creativity.

¹ Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1990) 86.

² Ford Madox Ford, Return to Yesterday (New York: Liveright, 1972) 107-08.

³ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973)

⁴ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1991) 279-80.

⁵ Jean Cocteau, *Orphée* (Paris: Editions Stock, 1986) 30. My translation.

⁶ Thomas von Hartman, "'On Anarchy in Music" in *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (New York: Da Capo, 1974) 118.

⁷ Kandinsky, "On the Problem of Form" in *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, 157-58.

⁸ Hakim Bey *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia 1995) 21.

⁹ Georges Hugnet, "The Dada Spirit in Painting" in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, Robert Motherwell, editor, (Cambridge, Mass" Belknap/Harvard, 1981) 131.

¹⁰ Hugnet, "The Dada Spirit," 131.

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¹² Hugnet, "The Dada Spirit," 131-32.

¹³ Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestoes and Lampisteries*, translated by Barbara Wright, (New York: Riverrun Press, 1992) 12.

¹⁴ Tzara, *Manifestoes*, 7.

¹⁵quoted in Rudlof E. Kuenzli, ed., New York Dada (New York: WillisLocker and Owens, 1986) 146.

¹⁶Robert Motherwell, ed., The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1989) 242-43.

¹⁷Hugo Ball, Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 41.

¹⁸ Ball, Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit , 45. My translation.

¹⁹ Ball, Flight out of Time, 19.

²⁰"Proudhon, der Vater des Anarchismus, scheint auch der erste gewesen zu sein, der um die stilistischen Konsequenzen wußte. Ich bin neugierig, etwas von ihm zu lesen. Hat man nämlich erkannt, daß das Wort die erste Regierung war, so führt dies zu einem fluktuierenden Stil, der die Dingworte vermeidet und der Konzentration ausweicht. Die einzelnen Vokabeln und Laute erhalten ihre Autonomie zurück. "

²¹ "Brecht against Lukács," Aesthetics and Politics, 73.

²² Ball, Flight out of Time, 20.

²³ Ball, Flight out of Time, 20

²⁴quoted in Sadie Plant, The Most Radical Gesture (London: Routledge, 1992) 52.

²⁵quoted in Lewis, 128.

²⁶ Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in The Freud Reader, edited by Peter Gay (New York: Vintage 1987) 222.

²⁷ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Illuminations, 175.

²⁸ Benjamin, Illuminations, 175.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, 164.

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, Reflections, 182.

³¹ Ball, Flight out of Time, 75.

³² Andre Breton, Nadja, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960) 142-43.

³³ Benjamin, "The Destructive Character" in Reflections, 302.

³⁴ Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," 303.

³⁵ "Adorno to Benjamin," Aesthetics and Politics, 123.

³⁶ Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 23.

³⁷ Breton, Manifestoes, 124. The allusion is to Bakunin's aphorism, "The urge for destruction is also a creative urge."

³⁸ Breton, Manifestoes, 125.

³⁹emile Henry in The Anarchist Reader, 195.

⁴⁰Murray Bookchin, Post-Scarcity Anarchism (Montreal: Black Rose Books,1990)79.

⁴¹ Emma Goldman, Anarchism, 63.

⁴² Bookchin, Toward an Ecological Society (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986) 259.

⁴³ Richard Dawkins, The Blind Watchmaker (New York: Norton 1987) 196.

⁴⁴ Dawkins, 197.

⁴⁵ Bakunin, “Church and State” in The Anarchist Reader, 85.

⁴⁶quoted in Nordau, Degeneration, 180.

⁴⁷Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Richard Wagner, (München : Verlagsanstalt F. Bruckmann, 1904) 175. My translation.

⁴⁸ Frank J. Barrett, “Radical Aesthetics and Change” in Stephen Linstead and Heather Höpfl, The Aesthetics of Organization (London: Sage Publications, 2000) 228-245.

⁴⁹ Bookchin, Ecological Society, 121.

⁵⁰ Bookchin, Ecological Society, 262.

⁵¹ Hakim Bey, 105.

⁵² Chris Carlsson’s many flyers are available on the website for San Francisco Critical Mass.

⁵³ Bookchin, Ecological Society, 273.