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## **Parasites and Para-Sites**

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**Edited by Tom Nairn and Mary Kalantzis**



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# Parasites and Para-Sites

Oliver C. Speck, Assistant Professor of German, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, USA

## Abstract

*My article traces discourses on parasites in film and the media and links these discourses to the creation of what I call “para-sites,” such as camps. Adding the dimension of biopolitics and the notion of the ban, the parasite becomes a working political concept, and no longer simply a trope that evokes an abusive relationship.*

*The paradox of the parasite (M. Serres, The Parasite) can be unfolded as follows: The modern state needs devices to transport people, goods and information, and simultaneously the state seeks to contain with biopolitical measures the emerging parasites: illegal immigrants, epidemic diseases, corruption and the noise that hinders the flow of information. However, the more perfect the control measures, the more opportunity for the parasite to latch onto the host. When now opponents of universal health care and social aid see an incentive to abuse the system, it is not that the object of the gaze is a parasite, but the gaze itself is infected because it sees parasites everywhere. A dangerous paranoid projection is taking place: People imagine themselves under the gaze of a parasite, who looks at them as a host, while, in truth, they treat illegal immigrants, the unemployed, and drug addicts as parasites in the sociological and the biological sense: as less than human. Far from controlling biological or social parasites, the system that sees parasites everywhere produces parasites. Such a parasite is defined solely by its para-legal status as a “bare life” (G. Agamben, Homo Sacer) that needs to be controlled, confined and contained in sites that are equally para-sites (e.g. Guantanamo Bay). While a prison inmate still has certain rights, a camp inmate loses all rights, including the right to be regarded as human.*

*To escape from this deadlock, I suggest that we need to think from the parasite’s perspective, a radically exterior and amoral position that refuses judgements, but is nevertheless political. With the aid of Lucian of Samosata’s dialogue on, or rather éloge of, the parasite, I will grasp this position as one that is indeed “para” not only “next to,” but also “more.”*

**Keywords:** Parasite, Film studies, Biopolitics, Agamben, Giorgio, Deleuze, Gilles, Foucault, Michel, Lucian

## The Perspective of the Parasite

The media are fascinated by metaphors of disease. Drug abuse reaches “epidemic proportions,” Islamic fundamentalism spreads “epidemicly” through the immigrant communities, recipients of welfare and the last computer-virus cost “our” economy billions, and so on... Implicit in these apocalyptic visions is the image of a parasite that latches itself onto a healthy host, weakening him to the point of his demise. I would like to shift the point of view of this narration – the perspective I have in mind is that of the parasite itself. It is indeed worth looking at the radical point of view of the bacterium, the virus, the rat – in short: the parasite – as it travels from host to host. This very limited perspective is, as I will show, a political perspective.

This perspective must necessarily be a paradoxical perspective, since it has to avoid taking binary and essential positions such as host/parasite, inside/outside. Rather, the parasitic position is liminal and always constructed in in-between spaces, truly an interstitial or perspectiveless

perspective.<sup>1</sup> To show the inherent danger in taking the positions of host and parasite, my article traces discourses on parasites in film and the media and links these discourses to the creation of what I call “para-sites,” whose exemplars are prisoner camps like Auschwitz, or today, Abu Ghraib. Here, Giorgio Agamben’s complex notion of the ban will clarify the biopolitical dimension of this discourse. As I will show, banning, for example, an illegal immigrant not only excludes this person from the political system, but also strips this perceived parasite of all political rights while keeping the person under the control of the state, thus producing what Agamben calls a *homo sacer*. In order to overcome the discriminating discourse that identifies outsiders as parasites, I suggest that we need to think from the parasite’s perspective, a radically exterior and *amoral* position that refuses judgements, but is nevertheless political. With the aid of Lucian of Samosata’s dialogue on the parasite, I will grasp this position as one that is indeed “para”: not only “next to,” but also “more.”

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer who suggested this term for valuable comments and suggestions. I also owe thanks to 6th-and-Grace-Productions for inspiration.



### Parasitic Positions: The Excluded Third

We all have a rough idea of what the biological parasite does with a host, but we should not forget the other parasite: Like Molière's *Tartuffe*, who takes advantage of our hospitality, the social parasite does not just eat for free, but also provides entertainment. Indeed, this is the etymological definition the dictionary provides: "*parasitos* – one who eats at the table of another, and repays him with flattery."<sup>2</sup> In French, "parasite" has an additional meaning that I would like to invoke here: It signifies static, the unwanted noise that disturbs any communication. However, as Michel Serres points out in his book, *The Parasite*, our attempt to exclude the uninvited third serves to raise the complexity of the system.<sup>3</sup> Instead of a sender-receiver arrow with an interrupting parasite/noise, Michel Serres posits the parasitic relation as tripartite, where the third position, the parasitic position, is interchangeable.<sup>4</sup> The parasite is said to disrupt communication, that is, the flow of information, but without the parasite, the system would be static and the meal rather dull. It could be said that we benefit from the parasitic intervention, i.e. by parasitizing the parasite. Instead of a predator/prey dualism, we can rather find a parasitic circle, where everybody parasitizes everybody else. Even the seemingly gentle Père Goriot of Balzac's eponymous novel off whom everybody feeds, turns out to be an emotional parasite, as James John Baran has shown in an article.<sup>5</sup> Serres reminds us "that man is the universal parasite, that everything and everyone around him is a hospitable space."<sup>6</sup> In parasitological terms, we could also say that the third term seems to be so well excluded that we don't even realize it is there.

It is easy to find countless examples in our culture that show the analytical value and applicability of the concept. Obesity is more and more perceived as parasitism, as recent cultural studies state.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that Disney expects Michael Moore's film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, to create so much noise that it might prevent the huge tax-cuts they expect from the Bush-administration in Florida. It is important to point out the political aspect of the notion of the

parasite, which we can see in the parasitic circle *par excellence* that of the computer software licensing agreement. Since we need to communicate – not to communicate would exclude us from the community, i.e. mean social death – we have no choice but to click the "I agree" button on the "end user license agreement." This document basically states that the user is not the owner but its parasite. Not only does the computer program, for which money was sucked from us, not belong to us, but our communication is prone to be interrupted by a computer virus that uses the shortcomings of this program.<sup>8</sup>

However, what is more fruitful than citing hundreds of other examples that come to mind is discussing the fact that we all know about these parasitic relations and do nothing about them. To bring up one last example to show our affinity to the biological parasite: we live *in* clothes made in developing countries and drink the coffee that was produced by what boils down to slave labour. That we in turn, are parasitized by overpaying for these products does not change anything. Indeed, it seems that this parasitic mechanism of our culture is a prototypical ideological symptom, a fetishistic disavowal of our own unethical behaviour: "I know very well, but nevertheless..." We act as if the relationships were linear – goods for money – but in reality this phantasm covers the failure of our ideology: the worker in the Third World has no choice but to accept to be parasitized by us. As is well known, self-analysis does not work, and for a cure to take place we need the (empty) place of the Master, the structurally necessary but impossible "subject supposed to know." The person who occupies this place is an impostor, as Lacan reminds us, a highly paid one – in short, a parasite.

The vampiric nature of capitalism has often been evoked, and there have been hopes that the entire system might collapse from over-consumption. Bernard Aspe and Muriel Combes, for example, argue that "immaterial" labour – the centre of production of postmodern capitalism – will provide the means to destroy capitalism by helping its subjects to organize themselves. The point of resistance to parasitic capitalism for Aspe and Combes would be a "preindividual dimension," a dimension at "the root of subjectivity."<sup>9</sup> However, capitalism is rather an extra-individual dimension,

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<sup>2</sup> Liddell-Scott-Jones *Lexicon of Classical Greek* – online edition: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>

<sup>3</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, 14, 18 and 67. For a concise introduction into Serres' work and the place of *The Parasite* in his oeuvre, see the introduction by Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell to: Michel Serres, *Hermes – Literature, Science, Philosophy*, Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell, eds., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982, esp. xxvi-xxix.

<sup>4</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 53-54.

<sup>5</sup> James John Baran, "Predators and parasites in *Le Père Goriot*," *Symposium*, Spring 1993, Vol. 47, Issue 1, 3-16, here: 7: "*Le Père Goriot* is a veritable 'flea circus,' with new parasites emerging on almost every page."

<sup>6</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Fat Boys: A Slim Book*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. See also: Dinitia Smith, "Demonizing Fat in the War on Weight," *New York Times*, May 1, 2004.

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<sup>8</sup> The last occurrence of a computer virus at the time of writing can also serve as an example for the conflation of politics and life, i.e. biopolitics, which I will discuss below: The author of the virus, an eighteen-year-old from Germany, was identified and arrested by FBI and German police like an extremely dangerous criminal, even though his parasitic program only used a fault in the operating system of a private company, which, needless to say, does not pay for its customers' damages but sues for compensation.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Aspe and Muriel Combes, "Du vampire au parasite," *Futur antérieur*, 35-36 (1996), 207-219, here: 218.

and as ideology it constructs subjectivity. There simply is no dimension that is not already organized by capitalism. And, as the example of the “end user license” above shows, the extension of capital is unlimited for the foreseeable future because the dialectical machine of capitalism will always provide its own parasite (noise).

This metaphoric use of the notion of the parasite would also be a point of disagreement with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who refer to Aspe and Combes in passing and who see capitalism as a parasitic attack on subjectivity. A section in the last chapter of Hardt and Negri’s work, *Empire*, the chapter that sketches strategies of resistance, describes “the multitude” as a resisting force, while “Empire,” the faceless, centreless, powers of postmodern capitalism and globalization are only reactive:

Imperial power is the negative residue, the fallback of the operation of the multitude; it is a parasite that draws its vitality from the multitude’s capacity to create ever new sources of energy and value. A parasite that saps the strength of its host, however, can endanger its own existence.<sup>10</sup>

The “multitude” – which is never sufficiently defined in *Empire* – could be seen as the concept of a non-essential mass of beings as Bergsonian “life-force.” It is a strange lapsus that Hardt and Negri evoke the parasite in the old metaphor of healthy host and pest, while they suggest to rethink postmodern politics in spatial and structural patterns. I suggest that we should really think the parasitic relation fully in spatial terms, that is, take it *seriously* and not treat it as a simple unproblematized trope that evokes an abusive relationship. In parasitic terms, the original relation of ownership is a two-fold move: A space is declared property and a new order is imposed which bans those considered a nuisance to the system – “the space must be deparasited.”<sup>11</sup>

But the nature of this parasite, the banned parasite, is paradoxical and cannot be thought without, for lack of a better way of putting it, transporting ourselves to another site, a site “next-to,” “para.” To start my meditation on “the point of view of the parasite,” I therefore have to open *para-sites*, which I will for now define as the sites through which I have to travel to understand the perspective of the parasite. Or, if you like long German words for small concepts, I have to open a “Nebenkriegsschauplatz.”<sup>12</sup> In the following, I will

first travel through and with film to Agamben’s biopolitical concept of the *homo sacer* and then look for the parasite’s *technē* in Lucian’s dialogue on the parasite. Adding the dimension of biopolitics and the notion of the ban, the parasite becomes a working political concept, and no longer simply a term of abuse and discrimination.

### The Para-site: Agamben’s Concept of the *Homo Sacer*

Like modern disease control, film is a child of the nineteenth century. Its kinship to the experience of travelling by train – the modern means of transportation that also spread disease – has often been remarked. Also, a film is a social parasite in so far as it latches onto us, eats our money and our time and provides entertainment. I have chosen a film that is not especially well-known, *So Long at the Fair*, directed by Antony Darnborough and Terence Fisher. The credits do not mention that this British film from 1950 is actually a remake of *Verwehte Spuren* from 1938, released in the US under the title *Covered Tracks*, and directed by Veit Harlan, who also made one of the most infamous propaganda films, *Jew Süss*, about the rise and fall of a parasite.<sup>13</sup>

The stories in both films, *So Long at the Fair* and *Verwehte Spuren*, are virtually identical and are based on an urban myth: In the late nineteenth century, a young woman and her brother arrive in Paris to visit the World Fair. They check into their elegant hotel-rooms. The brother is not feeling well and retires early (in the German version it is a Canadian mother and her daughter). The next morning, the young woman not only has to face the disappearance of her brother, but his entire hotel room seems to have vanished. The hotel staff claim that she arrived alone and deny ever having seen a brother. Police, guests and staff treat her like a mad person.<sup>14</sup> After some detective work and with the help of a charming young gentleman the riddle is solved: The brother caught a form of the plague in the south of Italy and the authorities, to contain the disease and – a very important point – to prevent

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site of minor importance); “neben” would translate as *para*, next to.

<sup>13</sup> It is telling that Harlan’s film itself can be said to be a parasite: Claude Singer shows in his study on *Jud Süß* how the Nazis carefully studied other films and adopted their rhetoric while distorting their message (Claude Singer, *Le juif Süß et la propagande nazie: L’Histoire confisquée*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003.). For *Jud Süß* the Nazis parasitised the British film *Jew Süß* by Lothar Mendes from 1934, based on Lion Feuchtwanger’s successful novel *Jud Süß* from 1925, banned in 1933 in Germany, thus transforming a film of sympathy and tolerance into an instrument propagating racial hatred.

<sup>14</sup> This is, by the way, also the basic plot of *Midnight Warning* by Spencer Gordon Bennet (1932), the first adaptation of this urban myth, as well as that of Hitchcock’s *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), which clearly inspired the recent *Flightplan* by Robert Schwentke (2005).

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard UP, 2000, 361, see also 359-61.

<sup>11</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 95. Serres only hints at the fascist nature of this law. I will come back to this point later in my discussion of Agamben.

<sup>12</sup> A common German portmanteau word that merges “Kriegsschauplatz” (theatre of war) and “Nebenschauplatz” (a

wide-spread panic, had the sick brother spirited away and quarantined, and the hotel room hermetically sealed.

We can see several parasites at work in this fascinating film: The containment of a plague-victim is for Michel Foucault the perfect example of the mechanism of a disciplined society. While lepers had been exiled to keep the community pure, the containment of plague-victims asks for a different form of organization, since the entire community must be placed under close surveillance.<sup>15</sup> Foucault famously calls this form of government, whose emergence is linked to modernity, “biopolitics”:

For the first time in history [...] biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention.<sup>16</sup>

This concept of biopolitics describes an important shift in governing, a shift in perspective that is so far reaching, that we cannot imagine our political world differently. The modern state becomes a manager of the community,<sup>17</sup> using all the scientific tools at its disposal ‘to do the job’ of competing with other nation-states. When citizens are starving or dying of disease, the state plans ahead and administers vaccinations. The government trains its subjects, first in school, then in the military. And if they should refuse to play along, it invents measures to discipline them. In a way the state knows not what it does, as it slips into biopolitics, rather than really having biopolitical control as a program of governance, but it is nevertheless a biopolitical body.

It is no coincidence that the shared story of *Verwehte Spuren* and *So Long at the Fair* was originally adapted in 1938. When the National Socialists came to power, they had a whole array of biopolitical tools at their service, all installed and tested in the previous century: statistics, eugenics, a

register of the population and a military-industrial complex. The ensuing mass-murder on an industrial scale is understood by the murderers themselves as an exclusion of a foreign element from the body of the people. At this point we can understand the logic of the *para-site*, the other parasite I invoked earlier, the *para-site* understood in spatial as well as structural terms: Through the exercise of power by the state, a person can be excluded from a society, but this person is still subject to this power, because it is this power that maintains him *as outside* the state. That is, the person is not “outside” the reach of the state, but all the more in its grasp. For the political philosopher Giorgio Agamben it is precisely this that comprises the paradox of sovereignty. The modern dictator does not rule ‘by the grace of God’ or the will of the people, but through a permanent state of exception.<sup>18</sup> Agamben’s concepts can be readily translated into parasitic terms: By declaring a “state of exception” the dictator does not create a new order – even though he might promise to do that – but latches on to a perfectly legal system. Thus, the dictator effectively exempts himself from the law, yet is not *outside* of it; while, at the same time, the people banned by the dictator from the “body of the people” are neither forced into exile nor put to trial but kept in a camp, a *para-site*. Consequently, one of the first decisions to be made in Nazi Germany concerned who was to be considered a lawful citizen and who was not (the Nuremberg laws). Another decision concerned those who are worthy to live and those whose “life is not worth living” (“*lebensunwertes Leben*”).<sup>19</sup> At the beginning this meant sterilization, later the so-called “*euthanasia*” of thousands of mentally or physically handicapped, and finally the death of millions in the concentration camps.

For Agamben, the concentration camp is what lies at the end of a process that began long before the camps were created, a process that showed its effects only at the ‘height’ of modernity. The figure of the *homo sacer*, which lies at heart of Western law and politics, is the human who is banned from the community and, as Agamben stresses, can be killed but not sacrificed. Agamben’s concept of “bare life” concerns life from the strict point of view of the political, and designates the increment that is left over when all political rights are stripped away. Agamben summarizes his arguments in the last chapter of his book *Homo Sacer*:

1. The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion).
2. The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political

<sup>15</sup> See the chapter on “Panopticism” in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage, 1979, esp. 198-98.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality - Vol. 1: An Introduction*, New York: Vintage, 1990, 142; see the chapter on “The Right of Death and Power over Life”: 135-45. See also Foucault’s concise seminar description in Michel Foucault, “The Birth of Biopolitics,” trans. Robert Hurley et al., *Essential Works, Volume I: Ethics – Subjectivity and Truth*, Paul Rabinow, ed., New York: New Press, 1997, 73-79. Agamben, whom I will discuss below, expands and reworks Foucault’s notion, since biopolitics is always inscribed in the founding act of sovereignty. Hence Agamben’s notion that the site of biopolitics is the camp and not the prison. See also: Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, “Book Review,” *Substance* #93, 2000, 124-131, here: 128-131.

<sup>17</sup> As Foucault puts it, biopolitics concerns the “question of how to introduce economy [...] into the management of the state.” Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” trans. Robert Hurley et al., *Essential Works, Volume III: Power*, James D. Faubion, ed., New York: New Press, 2000, here: 207.

<sup>18</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998, esp. 15-29.

<sup>19</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 136-43.

element, and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoē* and *bios*.

3. Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, Agamben sees the same mechanism at work in modern politics as in fascist Germany: The dangerous precedent set by the Nazis, one still perpetrated today, is the creation of in-between spaces – Agamben calls them “thresholds,” I refer to them as para-sites – where *de facto* people can be kept in legal limbo. There we do not find prisoners who, although separated from the community, still are subject to the penal code, but rather inmates who are reduced to “bare life” and to whom no law applies. This is fully consistent with so-called “humanitarian” values that make it possible to keep fugitives apart from the population, to feed and house them, but would never give them citizenship.

The explanatory power of Agamben’s model stems from his insight that states, totalitarian and democratic alike, do not proclaim “enemies of the state” in the mode of a simple “us/them” distinction. “Them” would imply a true outside to the state. Rather, the modern state is like a machine that works to abolish the outside<sup>21</sup> just as it produces the condition under which people can be reduced to a “bare life.” The same foundational momentum that creates any sovereign state (the simple performative speech act: “We lawfully declare our sovereignty, by giving ourselves a law!”) must *necessarily* bring about the conflation of politics and life, because the paradoxical nature of the founding statement implies, too, that these laws can be suspended in times of crises, as the discussion of the dictator’s declaration of a state of exception above showed. And, since laws by definition regulate the social life of the individuals that live under a given jurisdiction, the “monstrous law of the threshold” rules by regulating nothing but bare life. We should not forget to think this shift to biopolitics as a ‘true’ shift in perspective, as a new ideology. For it is a new ideology that makes it possible for the majority of the population to play its role willingly in this machine, without seeing the modern state for what it obviously is: a prison-camp. Expanding Foucault’s notion, Gilles Deleuze describes the shift to biopolitics in a short, but influential article, as a

passage from a “disciplinary society” to a “society of control.”<sup>22</sup>

The paradox of the *para-site* can be unfolded as follows: The modern state needs an infrastructure. It needs devices to transport people, goods and information, and simultaneously the state seeks to contain and purge with biopolitical measures the emerging parasites: illegal immigrants, epidemic diseases, corruption and the noise that hinders the flow of information. However, the more perfect the control measures, the more opportunity for the parasite to latch onto the host.<sup>23</sup>

*Verwehte Spuren* is a propaganda film, one of many films that, albeit in a hidden manner, propagate the purging of parasites from the “healthy body of the nation.” We all remember the images from the Nazi film *The Eternal Jew* (*Der ewige Jude* by Fritz Hippler, 1940) that likens running inhabitants of a ghetto to rats, the prototypical parasite,<sup>24</sup> while the inhuman living conditions of the ghetto were caused by the Nazis themselves. It is nevertheless noteworthy that this film from 1938 explores an underlying anxiety which is a very modern anxiety: We all want the government to organize our communal life for us, but what happens when I myself am singled out by that gaze and banned from the community? Even here, in the work of a dedicated Nazi-director, we can grasp a glimpse of the truth about fascism: The perversion of fascism lies in the fact that, from the fascist point of view, the life of the parasite – the camp inmate – is literally “worth nothing.” The gaze of fetishism sees parasites everywhere.

To take another example: When opponents of universal health care and social aid see too many opportunities – indeed even incentives – for abuse of the system, it is not that the object of the gaze is a parasite, but the gaze itself is infected because it sees parasites everywhere. A dangerous paranoid projection is taking place: People imagine themselves under the gaze of a parasite, who looks at them as a host, while, in truth, they treat illegal immigrants, the unemployed, and drug addicts as parasites in the sociological and the biological sense: as less than human. We can see the danger in the precedent of Guantanamo Bay, where “terrorists” are banned from American soil in a camp without the right to a fair trial. And already a law of

<sup>20</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181. For an introduction to Agamben’s concepts see the very insightful review essay by Hussein and Ptacek, “Thresholds: Sovereignty and the Sacred,” *Law & Society Review*, Volume 34, Number 2 (2000), 495-515.

<sup>21</sup> See here: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, esp. 351-423. Hardt/Negri are strongly influenced by this idea. “Empire” is the state-machine that has only an interior. Consequently, there are no wars in the common sense but only police-actions.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle,” in: *Pourparlers*, Paris: Minuit, 1986. An English translation is available on several web sites (for example: Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript to the Societies of Control.”

<http://www.watsoninstitute.org/infopeace/vy2k/deleuze-societies.cfm>). See also Hardt/Negri, *Empire*, 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> To give a more mundane example: the more information is available online, the easier it is for students to steal their papers off the Internet.

<sup>24</sup> Serres builds his essay on the parasite largely on the La Fontaine-fable of the country- and the city-rat.

exception, the “USA Patriot Act,” is used to pursue crimes other than terrorism.<sup>25</sup>

Let me sum up my points: Far from controlling biological or social parasites, the system that sees parasites everywhere *produces* parasites. Such a parasite is defined solely by its para-legal status as a being that needs to be controlled, confined and contained in sites that deserve the name *para-sites*. The society of control is this machine that, by seeking to abolish its outside, erodes all political rights, including the right to be regarded as human in terms that are at once legal, philosophical, and biological.

We have now sketched the dangerous mechanism that leads to the creation of parasites and their banning into para-sites, but what about the perspective from the *para-site* itself? Since this perspective comes from the threshold of the community, it cannot be an “outsider’s perspective” nor a dialectic of individual and community. The *para-perspective* as alternative to the whole – the “timeless” vision of the community – must necessarily be fragmented and ephemeral. What makes *So Long at the Fair*, the 1950 film, fascinating is that it provides us with a glimpse of this perspective. Already the title evokes the noise and the unruly, distraction-seeking crowd that we generally associate with a fair. After all, a fair, even the one, as the film often reminds us, that provides Paris with its Eiffel-Tower, is not a cultural event, but a site of kitsch and light entertainment for thousands of thrill-seeking strangers from all over the world. Throughout Vicky Barton’s desperate search, the film often shows the young woman surrounded by a vast crowd at the world’s largest fair. The only witness who could corroborate Vicky’s story is Nina, a young part-time chambermaid to whom we did not pay much attention when she appeared first, and who is about to take off in a hot-air-balloon with her fiancé. When Vicky catches up with her, Nina promises to accompany Vicky to the police after the flight. But as soon as Nina and her fiancé are up in the air, the balloon catches fire and the two fall to their death. The way the film shows this event is telling and provides us with a critical insight. We see Vicky’s relaxed face in a close-up – everything will be good now – but the gasp of the crowd makes her turn around. From her point of view, we see the balloon high in the sky and on fire, then crashing to the ground engulfed in flames. The horrible scream of the maid is drowned out by the screams of the crowd. While people rush to the site of the accident, Vicky walks away with a dazed expression – her only hope just died. She is filmed in a medium long shot, from an elevated position. What is crucial here

is Vicky’s lack of empathy. Two young, happy people just died a horrible death, but neither she nor we, as spectators bound to the heroine’s perspective, feel bad for them. Later, we see Vicky in a train-compartment, while in the compartment next to her a young woman is seen off by a man and a child. Again, neither our heroine nor we pay much attention to this little para-story that unfolds next to her and the main story: It is a sad good-bye, where the man and the woman can barely keep their countenance. Maybe the mother is ill and is leaving for a cure? Are there political reasons? Will they ever meet again?

Vicky’s perspective is that of a parasite because it is entirely egotistical and amoral, and the vision of the community is that of thousands of parasites bound by nothing but a spectacle. Only the solution of the puzzling disappearance of brother and room puts Vicky’s para-perspective in relief again, that is, integrates her into the community. Naturally, it is the benevolent doctor who accounts for the biopolitical aspect of the event: If the brother’s infection with the “black death” should become public, people would flee Paris and the financial losses would be immense. The economic interests of the merchants and the “twenty million visitors” (the number is repeatedly mentioned throughout the film) clearly outweigh the perspective (or claims) of the truth. Our heroine and her companion quickly accept this view of the events – a decision that is absolutely in character: as the film often reminds us, Vicky Barton has no money of her own. Both versions stress the girl’s financial dependence and in both films, a precious piece of jewellery that belonged to the mother leads the young girl to unravel the mystery of the vanished relative. When the girl accepts the deal, hanging on the arm of her fiancé, she has just changed hosts.

But the little *para-stories* undermine this wholesome vision by posing two related questions. How can there be a community, when there are more than twenty million parasites? Obviously, community is an illusion, an image that is retroactively created for a society that is bound by nothing but a spectacle. But there is an even more pressing political question for the parasite: When a community hosts you, what do you owe the community?

At this point, we should consider the role of the parasite in a community. Coming from somewhere else, he brings the outsider’s perspective to the community. Georg Simmel’s concept of the stranger shows a close affinity to the parasite, as I explore it here. Already in 1908, in his “Excursion on the Stranger,” Simmel famously defines the stranger not as a migrant, who comes and goes, but as one, “who come today and stays tomorrow – in short, the potentially migrating, who, though he did not move

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<sup>25</sup> Eric Lichtblau, “U.S. Uses Terror Law to Pursue Crimes From Drugs to Swindling,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2003.

on, has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going.<sup>26</sup> Since the migrant is now part of the group but, coming from abroad, will always be a stranger, his status is one of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, a position he shares with “the poor, and the various ‘inner enemies.’”<sup>27</sup> Crucial for the problem of the parasite is Simmel’s insistence on thinking the stranger as a position. It is indeed fascinating, how much of Simmel’s concepts find their echoes in Foucault and Agamben. For Simmel, the prototype of this stranger is the merchant. Since a closed economic circuit would not need an outsider to move the products, the stranger-merchant must automatically be a “Zwischenhändler,” doing the middleman’s business. He is the classic intermediary, who introduces new goods that were produced somewhere else.<sup>28</sup> The *Zwischenhändler* clearly leads a para-sitic existence – a merchant (“Händler”) who finds his existence in the impossible space in-between (“zwischen”) the circulating goods. He leads a strange ex-sistence, paradoxically on the inside and the outside of the system, an inter-mediator of the circulation of goods and money.

The position of the stranger, as Simmel reminds us, is precarious. Insofar as the stranger is not attached to any party or a political view by virtue of birth, he is the ideal scapegoat. However, this lack of attachment allows a certain freedom in judgement which Simmel calls “objectivity.” Simmel quickly underlines that he does not mean a neutral observer but, as he puts it, a “positive-special way of participation.”<sup>29</sup> This participation can be seen as a perspectival truth, a truth that is “objective” in the sense that it is objectively political and participating in an entirely para-sitical way.

### The Parasite’s *Technē*: Lucian’s Dialogue

To explore this question of the “positive-special way of participation,” I have to travel to another parasite, Lucian of Samosata’s dialogue on, or rather *éloge* of, the parasite.<sup>30</sup> Author and work are an

exemplary case. Writing in 1418, an early translator of *The Parasite*, Guarino da Verona, rightfully calls Lucian in his dedication, “a Greek parasite.”<sup>31</sup> Lucian indeed learned Attic Greek as a second language, and as a worthy predecessor of Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett, his oeuvre is highly conscious of the operation of language. We could say that the Renaissance cherished Lucian for the reasons for which he was derided in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As David Marsh puts it in his study on Lucian’s reception in the early Renaissance: “The distinguishing feature of Lucian’s work lay in his use of satirical wit, and many Renaissance readers turned to Lucian for his iconoclastic side.”<sup>32</sup> For the German philologists who, in Goethe’s footsteps, searched for Greece “with their souls,” the *impurity* of Lucian’s work was unacceptable. Jacques Bompaigne writes in his detailed study: “Parodie et pastiche jouent un rôle capital dans la genèse de l’œuvre de Lucien.”<sup>33</sup> Graham Anderson describes the work of Lucian as, “a literary texture dense with self-pastiche; often its effect is to turn a facile entertainer into a highly elusive one.”<sup>34</sup> We can see from this quote that Lucian not only parasited others, but also himself, thereby raising the complexity of his text.

The figure of the parasite is a stock character in later Greek comedy.<sup>35</sup> But in *The Parasite*, Lucian offers a positive image of the parasite and famously parodies Plato’s *Gorgias*, and specifically the Socratic method. In Plato’s dialogue, Socrates proves to two rhetoricians, Gorgias and his student Polus, in rather harsh terms that rhetoric lacks *technē* and is only a praxis:

This practice, as I view it, has many branches, and one of them is cookery; which appears indeed to be an art [*technē*] but, by my account of it, is not an art but a habitude or knack. I call rhetoric another branch of it, as also personal adornment and sophistry – four branches of it for four kinds of affairs.<sup>36</sup>

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parasite in relation to his own text. Bompaigne, in his eponymous work on Lucien accepts Lucien’s authorship (Jacques Bompaigne, *Lucien écrivain: Imitation et création*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2000 [1958], 610.).

<sup>31</sup> See the translation of Guarino’s dedication in David Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998, 24-25.

<sup>32</sup> Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Bompaigne, *Lucien écrivain*, 600.

<sup>34</sup> Graham Anderson, *Lucian: Theme and Variation in the Second Sophistic*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976, 1. [Mnemosyne Supplementum Quadragesimum Primum]

<sup>35</sup> For an overview of the parasite in Greek comedy, see the rich and informative study of Heinz-Günther Nesselrath, *Lukians Parasitendialog: Untersuchungen und Kommentar*, Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 1985, 15-70.

<sup>36</sup> Gorgias, 462 E-463D. Quoted after the online edition, a verbatim copy of the Loeb classical library (*Plato in twelve volumes - Vol. III: Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias* [trans. W.R.M. Lamb], Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1975-1987.

<sup>26</sup> Georg Simmel, *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992:

764: “[...] als der Wandernde, der heute kommt und morgen geht, sondern als der, der heute kommt und morgen bleibt – sozusagen der potentiell Wandernde, der, obgleich er nicht weitergezogen ist, die Gelöstheit des Kommens und Gehens nicht ganz überwunden hat.” See esp. “Exkurs über den Fremden,” 764-71 (the German text can also be found online <http://socio.ch/sim/unt9f.htm>).

<sup>27</sup> Simmel, *Soziologie*, 765: “Der Fremde ist ein Element der Gruppe selbst, nicht anders als die Armen und die mannigfachen »inneren Feinde« - ein Element, dessen immanente und Gliedstellung zugleich ein Außerhalb und Gegenüber einschließt.”

<sup>28</sup> See Simmel, *Soziologie*, 765-66.

<sup>29</sup> Simmel, *Soziologie*, 766.

<sup>30</sup> It is not necessary for my argument to speculate whether *The Parasite* was really written by Lucian, although it might be tempting to expand the argument and describe the author as a

We can already see in this short quotation the classic struggle of philosophy and rhetoric, the often-evoked question of *technē* in this conflict, and, implicitly, the difference between a true friend, *philos*, and the one who is merely a flatterer, *kolax*. The parasite will abolish all these differences: he is a philosopher *and* a rhetorician, a flatterer *and* nevertheless a true friend, and, last but not least, as a master of his art, he is as knowledgeable about good food as a good cook.

The philosopher Lucian evokes, Simon – unlike his famous predecessor Socrates – never learned a craft. Simon is more a mix of rhetorician and philosopher. Asked by the curious Tychiades what he does for a living, Simon appears at first shy, but then he reveals the nature of his art: “Parasitic” (242).<sup>37</sup> In the following dialogue, “Simon the Parasite” (244) proves to the astounded Tychiades that a parasite indeed not only has a *technē*, but one that is superior to that of any other art. By skilfully referring to many authoritative intertexts directly and indirectly – among them the Odyssey – the philosophical parasite outperforms the sophists, is a better Epicurean than Epicurus and ethically a better human than all philosophers before him. The reader should now be careful not to be led on by the wit and obvious joy of the text to see here nothing but a parody. A parody, as Julia Kristeva reminds us, does not undermine the authority of another text, but strengthens this authority paradoxically by the act of transgression. Furthermore, the Menippean dialogue, to whose tradition *The Parasite* belongs, might be sarcastic, witty, and cruel – “carnavalesque,” as Kristeva calls it following Bakhtin – but it is always “serious.”<sup>38</sup> *The Parasite* performs a serious task and Bompaire aptly describes it, when he calls the text “une machine bien huilée mais à vide.”<sup>39</sup> One could reverse Bompaire’s insight and describe *The Parasite* as a pump, a machine that empties out. At this point, we might begin to see the strategy of *The Parasite*, which is not the reversal of perspective, but an operation that counters the above-mentioned abolishing of the outside by the modern state-machine, as well as the state’s production of the condition under which people can be reduced to a “bare life.” This operation, a political strategy, is rather one of abolishing the inside.

Let us look briefly at the parasite’s *technē* as Simon describes it. No stoic could conceptualize it

better. It comes as no surprise to see that the parasite is a city dweller. Where else would he find a rich man to host him? But here we find already the first characteristic of a parasite: he has to be a good judge of people, because “our artist has to distinguish critically the man who will entertain him satisfactorily and not give him reason to wish that he had sponged elsewhere.” (249). In order to catch the eye of the prospective host, another skill is needed, “the faculty of so directing your words and actions as to effect intimacy and convince your patron of your devotion [...]” (249). Then, finally seated at the table of the host, he faces his competition and has to “outshine other people” and be able to “tell a good dinner from a bad one.” (251). Last but not least, a good parasite needs to permanently “exercise his art” so as to not lose his skill; without “daily exercise, not merely his art would perish, but he with it.” (251) The *telos* that every real *technē* needs should be evident in the case of parasitism. Simon’s clarity leaves nothing unsaid: “I find nothing that serves a more useful purpose in human life than eating and drinking; without them you cannot live.” (251)

The interdependence of the two last points, exercise and the *telos* of nourishment, needs to be unfolded. It is important for our discussion and obviously for Simon’s as well, because he stresses the relation between “the simple bare necessities of life” (to quote another master parasite) and *technē* two more times. There is nothing essential in a parasite, for he is solely defined by eating and drinking: “Cold hungry philosophers you may see any day, but never a cold hungry parasite; the man would not be a parasite, that is all, but a wretched pauper, no better than a philosopher.” (283) If there should be any doubt left, Simon states near the end of the dialogue “that *a priori* one who lacks food is not a parasite.” (307) A well-fed person can be a parasite, but a hungry one is not. Should a parasite commit a crime, he is a criminal and a criminal only – it is as simple as that. (309) Thus, the essential quality of a parasite is solely determined by the exercise of this *technē* and his condition of having food and drink, i.e. absolutely external qualities. This positive image of the parasite is not the simulacrum of the banned *homo sacer*, nor its double, but its positive other. The depoliticized existence of the parasite as *homo sacer* as we described it above with Agamben can now be grasped as a true ex-sistence, a completely decentered being, void of essential qualities.

If we arrested the discussion at this point, we would fall back into the trap of opposed perspectives and of pseudo-liberalism – here the community, there the banned outsiders, kept alive, well fed, but stripped of any political rights. It is exactly at this point that the subversive geniality of Lucian’s text opens a new dialogue by evoking the etymology of the word “parasite.” Questioning the etymology of a

<sup>37</sup> Page numbers refer to: Lucian, “The Parasite,” in: *Lucian Vol. III*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press: 1968-1988: 235-317. I sometimes use the more colloquial translation from: *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Works by Lucian of Samosata: V3*, [Trans. H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler] (<http://www.gutenberg.net/etext04/lcns310.txt>).

<sup>38</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” in Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Leon S. Roudiez, ed., New York: Columbia UP, 1980, 64-91, here: 80.

<sup>39</sup> Bompaire, *Lucien écrivain*, 609. See also Bompaire’s discussion of *The Parasite*, 608-10.

concept is even typical for discussions of *technē*. Again, Lucian neither contradicts nor negates but rather empties out. Asked what it *means* to parasite, Tychiades readily knows the answer: “Getting your dinner at some one else’s expense.” (315) But Simon now evokes the etymology of the prefix “para,” which normally means “next to” or “near,” but can also evoke to do more or better.<sup>40</sup> The pun translates well into English. Simon declares the parasite to be “an out-diner” and continues:

\_Si\_. [...] Of these pairs, which do you consider the best? Which would you take, if you had the choice?-To sail, or to out-sail?

\_Tyc\_. The latter.

\_Si\_. To run or out-run?

\_Tyc\_. The latter.

\_Si\_. Ride or out-ride, shoot or out-shoot?

\_Tyc\_. Still the same.

\_Si\_. So I presume an out-diner is better than a diner? (315-17)

The strategy laid out here is of a brilliant simplicity: The parasite has to out-do everybody. When we find ourselves in the position of the stranger, banned to a para-site in a system where there is no place “outside” – and I understand Empire as a machine that produces *homini sacri* – the way “out” can only mean to out-perform. This is the only way to regain both politics and *polis*. The first text that demonstrates a modern parasitic strategy is also the first novel that understands what is at stake when politics becomes nothing but information: The Count of Monte Christo, Edmond Dantes, does not fight the agents of biopolitics, who had him banned to a para-site, but beats each of them in their own game by rechannelling money and communication.

The one element we have to take seriously in this task of out-doing everybody is the parasite’s *technē*. Martin Heidegger evokes an era, when the *technē* that is the origin of our pale technology today, still existed:

In Greece, at the outset of the destining of the West, the arts soared to the supreme height of the revealing granted them. They brought the presence [Gegenwart] of the gods, brought the dialogue of divine and human destinings, to radiance. And art was simply called *technē*. It was a single, manifold revealing. It was pious,

promos, i.e., yielding to the holding-sway and the safekeeping of truth.<sup>41</sup>

The “single, manifold revealing” is what we encountered before in Simmel’s paradoxical formulation of the “positive-special way of participation.” The perspective of the parasite can only be supplemental in a Derridean sense, outside the present, i.e. in the impossible perspective of the unconscious. This other time that Heidegger dreams, when technology was not simply technology, but was in the sphere of *technē* and thus connected to revelation, to the dialogue of the divine and the human, should not be thought as a nostalgic “return” but as a *passage à l’acte*.

We can finally answer the question what we, the strangers, owe the community that hosts us: a permanent out-cry, an out-disturbance, an out-consumption. What the parasitic heroine of *So Long at the Fair* should have done is exactly that: Cry out the truth, cause a panic and an economic crisis and bring down the entire corrupt system.

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed discussion of this passage see Nesselrath, *Lukians Parasitendialog*, 493-96. Nesselrath decides for a meaning of superiority and his arguments are fully convincing: Translating “para” as “with,” as Harmon does, makes no sense here.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” William Lovitt, trans., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper and Row, 1977, 34.

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