

Markus Messling & Jonas Tinius
On Minor Universality

Abstract: Our contribution seeks to render intelligible minor forms of a world-consciousness generated through social and cultural practices. Departing from Zineb Sedira’s installation “Dreams Have No Titles” for the French Pavilion of the 2022 Venice Biennale and concluding with our project’s research exhibition “The Pregnant Oyster: Doubts on Universalism” at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt, we discuss how narrative forms (beyond the book) produce experiences of a shared world. Shifting from an understanding of universality as effect of the universal in particular worlds, we return to the epistemological proposal of the *microstoria* (Ginzburg, Levi, Revel) to inverse this relation. In doing so, we suggest the concept of a minor universality, by which we describe the genesis of a universal consciousness from concrete contexts. Our notion mobilises Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the minor through their engagement with Franz Kafka. We draw on it to address the Algerian anti-colonial struggle and the practice of sonic radio resistance described in Frantz Fanon’s “This is the Voice of Free Algeria”. Not captured through the binary of power/resistance, minority/majority, ours/yours, the minor produces instead a potentiality for change, for the not-yet, which foreshadows and intuits a new humanity.

Keywords: universalism, decolonisation, Mediterranean internationalism, Venice Biennale, exhibition-making, narrative, *microstoria*, truth-procedure, Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, Frantz Fanon, Giovanni Levi, Zineb Zedira

Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it. (Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975], 17)

Note: Research that led to the publication of this book chapter was supported by the project “Minor Universality. Narrative World Productions After Western Universalism”, which received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant no. 819931).

Translated by Michael Thomas Taylor

1 The dream of humanity?

“The Milk of Dreams” is the motto chosen by the Venice Biennale 2022 for its exploration of how human existence is being transformed. Its title borrowed from Leonora Carrington’s eponymous book, the international exhibition aims to showcase artistic interrogations of what it means to live together on one planet. Keenly aware of a viral world crisis, confronted by the disenchantment that now attends technological progress, and powerlessness in the face of a pandemic of our own making, the Biennale is asking art to respond to the most existential form of the anthropological question: What does it mean to be human, in the shadow of humanity’s destruction and exploitation of the nonhuman world? Or more radically: “What would life look like without us?” (Alemani 2022, 47).

The question touches upon a universal awareness of our humanity, of the shared experience of living on one planet – our only planet – in the face of its possible destruction. This is an awareness that the multifaceted Biennale seeks to capture and articulate – in the universalist tradition of world exhibitions – as the state of human history. Such a perspective has long claimed to be the pinnacle of the global cultural field: a view of the whole, both encapsulated and broken down within national pavilions that appear to resist any further abstraction – did universalist modernism not ultimately result from a universalisation of nations? This is a perspective that has repeatedly claimed to allow us to see and hear the Other, to see and hear those who have been silenced and rendered unseen, and which thus repeatedly comes up against the dilemma formulated by Horkheimer and Adorno – that the capitalist cultural industry has long since understood how to co-opt forms of resistance.¹ Can something “minor” be expressed in such a world exhibition, through such a view of the world?² Can this context give rise to

¹ See the seminal chapter on the “culture industry” in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002 [1944]: 94–137); also Adorno (2009 [1957]). Boltanski and Chiapello describe how “the new spirit of capitalism”, as they title their book (2005 [1999]), “incorporated much of the *artistic critique* that flourished at the end of the 1960s” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005 [1999]: 419), along with its desire for liberation, autonomy, and authenticity. This leads them to speak of “the inherent ambiguity of critique: even in the case of the most radical movements, it shares ‘something’ with what it seeks to criticize” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005 [1999]: 40). What they see emerging is what they term the “spirit of capitalism”: “precisely the set of beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps to justify this order and, by legitimising them, to sustain the forms of action and predispositions compatible with it” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005 [1999]: 10).

² The title of our introduction departs from an understanding of the minor, which builds on the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. For them, it is literature – and specifically, the writings of Franz Kafka – that serves as a starting point for their theory of the “minor”, as a form of community mediated in language. In this introduction, we aim to mobilise this term deliberately



Figure 1: Installation View, *Les rêves n'ont pas de titre / Dreams have no titles*, Zineb Sedira, French Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022. Credit: Markus Messling.

something that disturbs our shared sense of history and, precisely in this way, thinks the world as a space of shared experience?

In the French pavilion of the Biennale, one finds a rectangular display case resembling a large aquarium (Figure 1).³ It contains a miniature of a living room made of cardboard, fully furnished with a fireplace, armchairs, a sofa table, houseplants, and bookshelves. The floor is covered with oriental carpets, where a female figure stands, recognisable upon closer inspection as a photograph of the artist Zineb Sedira. Slightly receding into the background, she occupies the vanishing point of the scene even as she gazes right back at us. The entire *tableau vivant* is in the style of

for modes of narration beyond the book, beyond literature, indeed beyond the canon of written texts that ultimately constitute what we are calling “minor universality”: shared experiences and consciousness of the “world” and its horizons that emerge from concrete narrative practices. Or to quote Deleuze and Guattari: such narration is the “whole other story [. . .] vibrating within it” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975]: 17).

³ We are very grateful to Zineb Sedira for permitting us to print our photos of her work in this context.

late-sixties and early-seventies decor, with overly bright, pop art posters on the walls, red seat cushions, records, small objects, and other ornaments. At first glance, all of it has the look of a charming dollhouse, a piece of self-reassuring kitsch from an idealised age. Does this installation present us with the *intérieur* of a society that has been seized, time and time again, by the desire to exhibit its culture? Does it mean to embody the “nation universaliste”? Stepping into the main room of the pavilion, one has precisely this impression, because the overall scenario immediately evokes a feel-good cliché: an old-time bar (it’s hard not to think of the “fabulous” world of



Figure 2: Installation View, *Les rêves n'ont pas de titre / Dreams have no titles*, Zineb Sedira, French Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022. Credit: Markus Messling.

Amélie Poulain), with film reels and movie scenes, advertising posters from the post-war *Orangina* age. “Dreams Have No Titles” is the shimmering slogan from an old movie theatre billboard from which Sedira’s installation takes its name.⁴

The oversized spotlight directed at the display case, though, creates distance; it marks the scene as staged and casts all of it in a different light (Figure 2). Only then does one notice the cameras all around, the monitors and spotlights, the fact that the entire installation is designed as a film set. If we arrived as passive on-lookers, we now become active observers challenged to look more closely. In a play of multiple *mises en abyme*, Sedira guides us to an utterly different story.

We are the ones now inside the display case. One of the pavilion’s side rooms is furnished just like the dollhouse, as if this little scene offered a set of building blocks for real life (Figure 3). In the same spot where the cardboard figure of the artist stood just a moment ago, we now find ourselves in the middle of a living room. This is a play with scales. The aquarium-like microcosm that seemed to represent Zineb Sedi-



Figure 3: Installation View, *Les rêves n'ont pas de titre / Dreams have no titles*, Zineb Sedira, French Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022. Credit: Markus Messling.

⁴ *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*, film directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Paris 2001.

ra's individual story becomes that of our own, or at least we are suddenly implicated in this world. And now, as we inspect its features, we begin to see so many details that provoke so many questions. There are photos of Algerian landscapes hanging on the walls, alongside family photos and a potpourri of film posters, many of them of Arabic origin, such as the poster for *Le doute mortel* (*The Murderer's Suspicion*, 1953) by the Egyptian director Ezz el-Din Zulfikar, whose work deeply influenced Arabic cinema. Wooden elephants serve as book stands, mixed in with African masks. There are records by the Algerian singer Zoubida and by the American Bob Destiny, the actor and musician who taught at the Théâtre National Algérien in the late 1960s and early 1970s. And of course there is the library, with editions of *Présence africaine* and the work of Frantz Fanon alongside Sartre and Lacan, with Detalmo Pirzio-Biroli's *Révolution culturelle africaine*, James R. Hooker's *Black Revolutionary*, and Guy Hennebelle's *Chroniques de la naissance du cinéma algérien* (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Installation View, *Les rêves n'ont pas de titre / Dreams have no titles*, Zineb Sedira, French Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022. Credit: Markus Messling.

The ensemble of references points to the revolutions, upheavals, and reorganisation of societies in the processes of decolonisation – and to the period of political freedom following Algerian independence that promised such great hope, especially for many African societies. At the same time, it illustrates the change in the

concept of culture itself that was brought about primarily by music and film.⁵ This altered concept is characterised by an ambivalent relationship to the new possibilities of film – because of course we have also been left with a cinema of “la douce France”, a tradition that produced imagery for the new, bourgeois world of the “Trente Glorieuses”, the 30 golden years (1945–1975); and at times this cinema reduced the colonial question to mere kitsch. The many film reels piled up to fill the main room invoke cinema itself as a myth of French post-war



Figure 5: Cinema Installation View, *Les rêves n'ont pas de titre / Dreams have no titles*, Zineb Sedira, French Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022. Credit: Jonas Tinius.

5 “What we call pop – pop music, pop philosophy, pop writing – Worterflucht [sic]. To make use of the polylingualism of one’s own language, to make a minor or intensive use of it, to oppose the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality, to find points of nonculture or under-development, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play” (Deleuze and Guattari 1985, 26f.). See also the influential work of Hall and Whannel (2018 [1965]).

modernism.⁶ Yet the very structure of myth implies that we are meant to see, like Oedipus who has lost his sight, only after the tragedy. It is only in remembering that we understand.

A minor detail opens the path for what has been repressed to penetrate into the living room like a spectre. In the space at the rear, behind the scene, is where the dead lie – where we find an empty coffin staring back at us (Figure 5), “filled” with associations evoked in references taken from Visconti’s film adaptation (1967) of *L’Étranger* by Albert Camus (1942) – a novel that tells the story of the senseless murder of an unnamed Arab person by the callous French Algerian Meursault. Motifs of alienation from the world, and of the weight of guilt, steal back into the mind. Hence, the question remains: Whose dead do we mourn? Who lies in the coffin? The beholder is invited to the wake. Two chairs stand by the casket: one seat for France and one for Algeria? For the Algeria that France was so keen to assimilate that it carved the country up into French departments, and which became the place where France finally destroyed its own universalistic ideals with brutal violence.

Rather than simply reviving the myth of French cinema, then, Zineb Sedira reinterprets it in a new form by telling us the story of an intellectual opening and a cinematic avant-garde located between Algeria, the Maghreb more widely, France, and Italy. This story encompasses Pontecorvo’s *Bataille d’Alger* (1966), Visconti’s *Lo straniero* (1967), and Lorenzini’s *Les mains libres* (1964), along with so many Algerian films that have largely been forgotten and to which Zineb Sedira also gives a material presence via the stack of film reels in the adjoining rooms. Yet what she emphasises is not the historical lines running between enemies and blocs: instead, she leaves us standing within a symbolic remake of an age of internationalism, in which hope was born for a humanity that might finally be worthy of this name.

Orhan Pamuk, in assembling his Istanbul *Museum of Innocence* (2012), programmatically rejected the institution’s grand representational gestures. His installation focuses instead on the similarity of emotions and experiences that, when integrated into a narrative, make it possible to experience a wholeness shared by all. In it, experiences of objects and emotions make intensities of shared life present and point toward the common grounds of human gestures:

What we feel when we open the curtains to let the sunlight in, when we wait for an elevator that refuses to arrive, when we enter a room for the first time, when we brush our teeth, when we hear the sound of thunder, when we smile at someone we hate, when we fall asleep in the shade of a tree – our sensations are both similar to and different from those of

⁶ With essays on the Romans in film, Greta Garbo, and Charlie Chaplin in his influential *Mythologies* (2009 [1957]), Roland Barthes ultimately elevated cinema itself from a producer of myths to the very myth of post-war society.

other people. The similarities allow us to imagine the whole of mankind through literature [. . .] (Pamuk 2010, 49).

Stylistically, too, Zineb Sedira's work evokes Pamuk's museum. She stages a scene that invites its visitors to explore performatively the possibilities of what it opens up: the power that art and other productions of culture possess – and for Sedira, this especially means film – to make connections between individual lives and a universal question, and thus to make possible an experience of universality from within a historically situated position. This kind of consciousness emerges from concrete contexts, in processes of remembering and translating – processes of repairing or even of making reparations. They aim thus toward a universal ideal of humanity – toward hope, solidarity, and shared human community. And it is this consciousness that we call “minor universality”.

2 Micro-cracks and macro-cuts

A brief excursus into the German translation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari can help us to articulate more precisely what we mean, since the notion of minor that they develop in their reading of Kafka, and which we cited in our epigraph above, is stubbornly translated in German as “klein” – meaning “little” or “small”. “Für eine kleine Literatur” – “Toward a small literature” – is the book's subtitle in German. But this isn't quite what “minor” means.⁷ Of course, “minor” as used by Deleuze and Guattari also refers to a small, even micro frame of reference; it pertains to concrete situatedness, to the embodiment and enactment of a certain kind of speech that estranges the standard use of speech, escapes it. Still, “minor” for them primarily denotes literature which has not yet been adopted into the canon, has not yet entered into the main currents of social and cultural discourse, but which rather “speaks” from another place and thus takes shape in a different use

7 On this point, see the commentary by the German translator Burkhart Kroeber (Deleuze and Guattari 2019 [1975]: 24). “In French, this is not *petite littérature*, but a more capacious phrase: *littérature mineure* (as opposed to the grand, recognised, well-established *littérature majeure*). To indicate this richness of meaning, as a makeshift solution Kafka's characterisation of ‘klein’ will be furnished with a gloss of ‘minder’ [lesser/minor] or placed in quotation marks.” – On the back cover of a 1980 collection of Gilles Deleuze's essays published in German by Merve Verlag under the title *Kleine Schriften* [Small writings], the following list appears vertically: “little, mini, lesser, low, minor, measly, minoritarian, inferior, underage, immature, idiotically, secondary, subordinate, mine worker, pioneer, minelayer, *frz. mineur*” (in the original: „klein, mini, minder, gering, niedrig, Moll, mickrig, minoritär, minderwertig, minderjährig, unmündig, schwachsinnig, zweitrangig, Untergebener, Bergarbeiter, Pionier, Mienenleger, *frz. mineur*.”) We thank Cord Riechelmann for the hint.

of language and form. It denotes a literature which has not yet been polished by the weight of custom, or which even stands in its way as a counter-discourse; which is perhaps nothing more than a murmuring or rushing sound that is gradually perceived like a sub-tone, or like noise. This is a sound, though, that can also infiltrate a more dominant frequency to appear not as foreign, as coming from outside, but as itself bound to the dominant tone, that even expresses itself in this dominant language or form. When Deleuze and Guattari attribute to a minor use of language a “high coefficient of deterritorialization” (Deleuze and Guattari (1986 [1975], 16), this does not exhaust itself in the mobility, migration, or displacement of the writer or speaker; the use of language itself can change within a given language or aesthetic form, create variation, introduce deviation, depart from received grammar. Such variations of language – “linguistic *action*” (Bogue 2005, 132) – are forms of grappling with conventions, labels, and, ultimately therefore engagements with power relations. Interestingly, they act not in an entirely different language, but parasitically. Major and minor do not denote two different languages, but “two usages or functions of language” (Deleuze and Guattari (1987 [1980], 104). “In this sense, the minor both compels obedience and opens passages” (Parr 2005, 164).

This is how, for instance, Kafka inscribes his own way of articulating into German, which may seem unremarkable at first but in fact entails taking a position vis-a-vis an authority – as a sign of a “minor becoming” (Deleuze and Parnet 2007 [1977], 124–125). It was Deleuze and Guattari (1986 [1975]) who showed that Kafka’s language, his writing, is a “becoming” which no longer signifies primarily through meaningful references but through effects of alienation, that tends more toward making it possible to experience the intensity of a position than references to the world that can be completely deciphered. In this case of Kafka’s relationship to authority, they argue, the complexity of this relating lies in the fact that Kafka does not – indeed could not – rise up in an oedipal fashion against his father, but rather that he counterposes his own weakness to that of his father precisely because he has understood that the father is already in a position of symbolic disempowerment: as a Jew who moved from the Czech countryside to the German-dominated city of Prague, Kafka’s father finds himself permanently displaced (one aspect of what Deleuze and Guattari call “deterritorialization”). What Kafka seeks, as they argue against a classical psychoanalytic interpretation, is not to assert himself against the father’s generation but to find a “way out”. This “line of escape” finds a subversive form in Kafka’s language, which is a “machine” of metamorphosis, an undermining of sense, a whistling and a coughing and a whining (Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975], 7, 21).⁸

⁸ In this respect, one must ask whether Deleuze and Guattari are implicated in the critique that is the foundation for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s analysis of whether the subaltern can speak,

That a rushing sound of this kind, a tinnitus in the ears of society, can develop to become a powerful, penetrating tone – one that speaks with truth, as though the reality of world had only just been grasped – is what Kafka’s literature revealed in dispatching its disruptive commentary into the faltering modernity of the Habsburg Empire and of (Imperial) Germany. For Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka’s literature stands precisely for a kind of “minor” that does *not* exist independently of or outside the dominant forms of expression, but nests within them and creates, from and within them, another form of consciousness. The “minor” is accordingly not to be misunderstood as an alternative in a binary of either/or, minority/majority; rather, it is to be grasped as a form of co-dependent opposition, a footnote, a variation that does not exist without a given unmarked standard. It is not to be essentially reduced to statistics or to identities either. It is possible to belong to a majority in a given context and yet not be the supposed norm:

Minority and majority are not only quantitatively opposed. Majority implies an ideal constant, a standard measure against which it is marked and evaluated. Let’s assume this constant or measure was *human-white-western-male-adult-reasonable-heterosexual-city-dweller-speaker of a standard language* (as Ulysses in Joyce or Ezra Pound). Obviously, the “human” is in the majority, even if he is less numerous than the mosquitos, children, women, blacks, peasants, homosexuals etc . . . The majority presupposes a juridical relation and a relation of governance, and not the other way around (Deleuze 1980, 27).

The minor describes a form of relating, a capacity for change, for escape, for the *not-yet*, for potentiality. In this sense, it is a political, collective, and perhaps utopian use of language, since it conjures up a “people to come” (Deleuze 1997 [1993], 90). Hence it can be most readily thought in relation to what is normative or axiomatic, to the standard that enforces homogeneity. “Micro-cracks are also collective, no less than macro-cuts are personal” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975], 127).

In “This is the Voice of Algeria” (1965 [1959]), Frantz Fanon describes such collective “micro-cracks” as appropriating the normative language and media of French colonial power in order to find a disruptive Algerian frequency of liberation –

in which she accuses Deleuze and Foucault’s thinking of indirectly reintroducing the European concept of the subject that they themselves criticise (Spivak 1988, 271–272). For Deleuze and Guattari, “marginalization”, processes of “becoming small”, or the production of unknown intensity are namely the prerequisite for any literature that effects a change by making it possible to feel something that cannot yet be said otherwise (Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975]: 18, 27). They therefore draw a line from Kafka to Artaud and Céline, and to Proust and Joyce. Moreover, one might even suggest that the very idea of “speaking” is undermined by their suggestion that the becoming-animal in Kafka’s writing is no longer about anthropocentric forms of expressions, but takes on other forms of articulation. On the problem of the relations between critiques of representation, singularity, and universality in literature, see Messling (2021).

and of a solidarity that unfolds precisely within these dominant forms. The Algerian resistance, Fanon notes, exploited the French medium of radio, which was “essentially the instrument of colonial society and its values” (Fanon 1965 [1959], 69). In the years leading up to the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), radio sets were not adopted by the Algerian society, since they threatened traditional types of sociability. Moreover, as Fanon points out: “For a European to own a radio is of course to participate in the eternal round of Western petty-bourgeois ownership” (Fanon 1965 [1959], 71). For the French occupiers, “the radio reminds the settler of the reality of colonial power and, by its very existence, dispenses safety, serenity” (Fanon 1965 [1959], 71). The radio, in other words, was a system of colonial information and civilising standard, presumed to maintain a regime of power and keep the colonial situation safe and sane. “Algerian society, the dominated society, never participates in this world of signs”, Fanon (1965 [1959], 73) notes. Just before the Algerian War, this radically changed. On 1 November 1954, when Algeria joined the anti-colonialist Maghreb Front, radio sets were acquired. “The Algerian who read in the occupier’s face the increasing bankruptcy of colonialism felt the compelling and vital need to be informed” (Fanon 1965 [1959], 75). It was at this moment that the Algerians organised themselves in the medium of the French occupation. This created fear, disruption. “The European, after 1954, knew that something was being hidden from him” (Fanon 1965 [1959], 78). Inarticulate bursts of madness undermined their safety further; “Individuals in a fit of aberration would lose control of themselves. They would be seen dashing down a street [. . .], shouting, ‘Long live independent Algeria! We’ve won!’ (Fanon 1965 [1959], 78). These moments of interruption led to an anxiety, because the French didn’t know anymore how these news spread, whether they were true, or not. By the end of 1956, Algerians bought radio receivers, and time tracts, broadcasting schedules, and wavelengths were distributed “announcing the existence of a Voice of Free Algeria” (Fanon 1965 [1959], 82). The medium of occupation became a medium of opposition, its function deterritorialised, its acts political, and its horizon the creation of a community to-come: “Since 1956, the purchase of a radio in Algeria has meant, not the adoption of a modern technique for getting news, but the obtaining of access to the only means of entering into communication with the Revolution, of living with it” (Fanon 1965 [1959], 82).

The French realised this, prohibited radio – even battery – sales. They shifted to engage in “sound-wave warfare” (Fanon 1965 [1959], 5), as they detected wave lengths of resistance, jammed the programmes, and rendered the *Voice of Fighting Algeria* temporarily inaudible. The medium of power became itself a battleground through the introduction of a minor function. The resistance distributed new wavelengths, Algerians tuning in for periods of two to three hours. Over the course of one broadcast, frequencies shifted several times. The French operator might have caught a glimpse of the *Voice of Fighting Algeria*. The bits of news that got through were

distributed by word-of-mouth, retold and distributed. “Imperfectly heard, obscured by an incessant jamming, forced to change wave lengths two or three times in the course of a broadcast, the *Voice of Fighting Algeria* could hardly ever be heard from beginning to end. It was a choppy, broken voice” (Fanon 1965 [1959], 86).

La Voix de l'Algérie libre et combattante (“Sawt El Djazair el hourra el mouka-fiha”) thus itself became a medium of battle, within the language of power. Liberation, as Fanon has shown in his phenomenological analysis, not only means inscription into the dominant medium, but always, too, an emphasis on what is one’s own, on the negation of the opponent and the discourse of struggle:

The natives’ challenge to the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of points of view. It is not a treatise on the universal, but the untidy affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute. The colonial world is a Manichean world (Fanon 1963 [1961], 41).

The radio of the Liberation Front speaks in its own language – both symbolically and more concretely in Arabic and not (only) in French. The radio is thus transformed from a weapon of repression to the disruptive noise of self-assertion, yet of the demographic majority battling colonial hegemony with view to a political community that was in the process of becoming. “Under these conditions, claiming to have heard the *Voice of Algeria* was [. . .] above all the occasion to proclaim one’s clandestine participation in the essence of the Revolution” (Fanon 1963 [1961], 87). Sedira’s installation in the French pavilion aptly echoes this repression, as a protagonist reads passages from Fanon’s *A Dying Colonialism* 1965 [1959] – yet another *mise en abyme* that allows us look behind the scenes built by violence (Figure 6).

Fanon thereby gained an unadorned view of a painful dilemma: “Illuminated by violence, the consciousness of the people rebels against any pacification” (Fanon 1963 [1961], 94). Yet any repair of the self, any self-reparations, are only a first step toward a new social order. “It is true to say that independence has brought moral compensation [in French: *réparation morale*] to colonised peoples, and has established their dignity. But they have not yet had time to elaborate a society, or to build up and affirm values” (Fanon 1963 [1961], 81). In this context, then, processes of resistance related to liberation, in which the fronts are clear even as they intersect and are deterritorialised, are particularly interesting, because this is where solidarities become visible that lie beyond the self. In his essay “This is the Voice of Algeria”, Fanon, too, is interested in the subtle appropriations that allow a minor position to insert itself into a dominant discourse by co-opting language: during the Algerian War, he argues, buying leftist, anti-colonial French dailies served to sow further insecurity, adding to the choppy voice of *Fighting Algeria*. Hence French society itself became an accomplice to Algerian independence:



Figure 6: Coffin Installation View, *Les rêves n'ont pas de titre / Dreams have no titles*, Zineb Sedira, French Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2022. Credit: Jonas Tinius.

For the Algerian to ask for *L'Express*, *L'Humanité*, or *Le Monde* was tantamount to publicly confessing – as likely as not to a police informer – his allegiance to the Revolution; it was in any case an unguarded indication that he had reservations as to the official, or “colonialist” news; it meant manifesting his willingness to make himself conspicuous; for the kiosk dealer it was the unqualified affirmation by that Algerian of solidarity with the Revolution. The purchase of such a newspaper was thus considered to be a nationalist act. Hence it quickly became a dangerous act. Every time the Algerian asked for one of these newspapers, the kiosk dealer, who represented the occupier, would regard it as an expression of nationalism, equivalent to an act of war. Because they were now really committed to activities vital to the Revolution, or out of understandable prudence, if one bears in mind the wave of xenophobia created by the French settlers in 1955, Algerian adults soon formed the habit of getting young Algerians to buy these newspapers. It took only a few weeks for this new “trick” to be discovered. After a certain period, the newsdealers refused to sell *L'Express*, *L'Humanité*, and *Libération* to minors. Adults were then reduced to coming out into the open or else to falling back on *L'Écho d'Alger*. It was at this point that the political directorate of the Revolution gave orders to boycott the Algerian local press (Fanon 2002 [1961], 81).

With Fanon, we find the threads stretching out across the Mediterranean that also made possible the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s – the art in which Zineb

Sedira finds hope for a new internationalism and a world bound together in solidarity, a world that joins both Mediterranean coasts into one horizon.⁹

In this sense, the term “minor universality” may at first seem like an internal contradiction: minor and yet universal. But it is precisely the initial bewilderment provoked by these seemingly paradoxical processes and connections that motivates this book – because horizons of universality that make connections, that remain open to experience or take shape in imagination, arise not (only) through standardising and totalising processes. History has certainly known a consciousness of world “from above”, created through missionary work and power. Western universalism has set the mould here,¹⁰ while also demonstrating its own implosion. Universality, we know, cannot be based on exclusion, but must always also think the minor, lest it lose integrity and collapse. This is exactly why the Marseillaise was sung by the slaves who had been freed in the Haitian Revolution: it is the liberation of those who have been oppressed in the name of freedom that promises the liberation of humanity.¹¹ We can think “a universal figure of minoritarian consciousness as becoming”, and in doing so, we need to turn to fields and “forces of becoming that are other than those of juridical relation or a relation of governance” (Deleuze 1980, 29).¹² In this respect, the attitude that conceives of the demand for freedom from a minor position is not only a reaction, an anti-thesis, to Western universalism; it aims at something more fundamental, at something that invents its own resources in articulating the idea of humanity and freedom.

Julia Christ has attempted to categorise the historical forms in which critiques of universalism have been articulated as attempts to address the concept’s political and social “blind spots”. She defines a first category as a “reconfiguration of the universal we try to achieve, through the particularities that the universal reintegrates”; this universalism aims to integrate what has not yet been considered into the existing concept of the universal. A second category, by contrast, refuses to include the particular and instead demands an “alternative universal”, a kind of counter-universal that begins with what universalism declares to be particular.

9 Deleuze and Guattari speak tellingly of Kafka’s “own third world” or his “own desert” – a process of marginalization even within “great (or established) literature” – as the only place where narrative has the power to enunciate collectives (Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975]: 18).

10 See also Wallerstein (2006, 1–29) and, on the violence inherent in a functionalist European rationalism, of course, still Horkheimer and Adorno (2002 [1944]).

11 On this historical tension, see Buck-Morss (2009) and also Hofmann and Messling (2021).

12 Lila Abu-Lughod’s ethnography *Veiled Sentiments. Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (1986) offers a rich account of poetic forms of expression that articulate otherwise hidden and sanctioned narratives in a context of patriarchal authority; ones which show how a minor consciousness, a minor community to-come can be formed and enacted within fields otherwise marked by hegemony.

And finally, she defines a third category which does not think unity from above, but is “structurally generated – and thus horizontally constructed – by certain distinctive oppositions relevant to the thought” (Christ 2021, 13–25). Creating relevance out of such fundamental contradictions is the task taken up by critical universalism. And it is Christ’s third category of critique that we have also taken up as our task, as a project that emphasises both a future creation of the universal, of the normative, out of concrete tensions, and the production and experience of the relevance this claims. The “minor” is thus no site or identity that can be fixed, but a relationship to the dominant standard that governs adaptation, just as thinking, producing, and demanding universality from within the minor is no relativistic gesture that would exhaust itself in reclaiming, pluralising, or provincialising Western, Northern modernity.¹³ Nor is it a process of re-juxtaposition, of re-canonisation following de-canonisation, or of simple re-territorialisation. Minor universality instead describes narratives that arise from a position embedded within a concrete situation, from unexpected social intensities, variations of standard expression, or from a particularised enunciation, to develop a power for our ability to conceive of “world” and of humanity, – and for our desires and obligations to do so (Messling 2019; 2023). Against the experience of violence that threatens and divides society, it is precisely from similar concrete minor practices and fields, which witnessed and incorporated the forces of destruction, that we derive our urgency and hope for a new universalism. Analytically speaking, this is the experience, which contemporary cultural practices seek to produce, since this is the way, it seems to us, that Zineb Sedira conceives her time of hope.

3 Universality after universalism

Hope is a driving force in the emergence of European universalism. In his book on *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (2003 [1977]), Alain Badiou invokes Paul’s doctrine of faith precisely to emphasise the groundlessness of the universal. Reformulating what at first seems to be a paradox – namely, a groundlessness in the face of a belief – Badiou argues that for Paul, the pre-Christian religious law shapes the universal as a specific way of life whose observance aims at salvation *after* life. But faith in love, Badiou continues, as expressed in Christ’s

¹³ Anthropologist James Laidlaw discusses cultural relativism as “an incoherent solution to a non-existent problem” (2014, 24), suggesting that “either the claim that all truths are relative applies to itself, in which case it is only relatively true, or it doesn’t, in which case there is at least one non-relative truth” (2014, 26).

resurrection, is what gives birth to the hope of overcoming death *in life* (Badiou 2003 [1977], 81–92). Badiou elaborates that for Paul, what is significant is thus not any interpretation of death and resurrection, a way of explaining what the event *means*, but rather a “truth procedure” (Badiou 2003 [1977], 84), it is about faith in the event itself – “love is precisely fidelity to the Christ-event” (Badiou 2003 [1977], 90). Faith in this event nevertheless needs to be publicly confessed, because the subjective experience of the truth is the same as the truth itself: “Truth is either militant or it is not” (Badiou 2003 [1977], 88).

What Alain Badiou proposes with his interpretation of Paul is thus not an understanding of truth that we could describe through interpretation, but a theory of epistemic form: it is only in the event that truth shows itself, and it is only faith in truth as an event that endows truth with power. For Badiou, however, this truth also reflects something universal: the fact that it equally encompasses all human beings (Badiou 2003 [1977], 76). What is decisive here is the direction of the movement: this is a universalism that comes from above. It is only because the event – the overcoming of death – transcends any form of particularity that it can be universal. What matters for Badiou here is the difference between the particularity that emerges from cultural and religious forms of life, and a singularity. No universal can arise from particularity, he argues, because particularity must determine the one truth according to its own contents and rules (in the same way that a religion determines its own conception of God). Singularity for Badiou is by contrast the transformation of the individual that comes from believing in the event, for it is precisely in believing that an individual becomes part of the universal and experiences their determination as part of the human community (Badiou 2003 [1977], 96–97).

The strength of this “Pauline universalism” therefore lies in the fact that it can cut through particular communities and reconnect human beings to truth that transcends particular limits. In a way, this also provides an explanation for the historical success of early Christianity throughout the Mediterranean. In 1977, in his first chapter on “Paul, Our Contemporary”, Badiou emphasised the power of this idea to shape community as an answer to the identity politics of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s radical right-wing party:

Although himself a Roman citizen, and proud of it, Paul will never allow any legal categories to identify the Christian subject. Slaves, women, people of every profession and nationality will therefore be admitted without restriction or privilege. As for ideological generality, it is obviously represented by the philosophical and moral discourse of the Greeks. Paul will establish a resolute distance to this discourse, which is for him the counterpoise to a conservative vision of Jewish law. Ultimately, it is a case of mobilizing a universal singularity both against the prevailing abstractions (legal then, economic now), and against communitarian or particularist claims (Badiou 2003 [1977], 13–14).

Badiou's book suggests a formation of the universal that in some ways repeats within the great upheavals of modernity. One might say: 1789 is above all the event of postulating human rights, and its legitimacy stems from a faith that this truth will prevail. "Universalism" would thus be a Western experience of truth, closely tied to monotheism – to the idea of the One God – that has nevertheless been universalisable since Paul. And yet what is also clear is that the significance of any transcendent truth is bound up with the specific ways in which it can be realised in different forms of life, in laws and social practices. The early Christian idea of living in faith and love so that this truth prevail is, after all, a specific experience shaped by a belief that the Last Judgment is nigh, which may appear to be insufficient in the context of enduring social structures where action requires long-term, institutional justification. In societies without any expectation of divine justice, what is needed are processes for identifying the universal, for articulating it as law and social practice, and this leads to particularisations. But this generates precisely those attributions that might link human rights to specific prerogatives, rights, or privileges, and that tie their unrestricted validity to economic, social, and political conditions. No sooner did the French Revolution claim to fulfil a mission in the name of humanity by spreading human rights than its revolutionary wars became wars of conquest that yoked this mission to a program of domination. Now, as Immanuel Wallerstein (2006) has shown, the universal was to be founded from within the cultural particularity of its origins, giving rise to the ideology of universalism, as an "ism", that justifies domination.

Faced with the fact that life thus always embeds the universal within a social context that particularises it, microhistory, as a method, has elevated the relationship between the concrete, specific case and the general, singling it out as a problem in its own right. And in doing so, it has also given the question of truth a new, scholarly cast, by asking about the method of its production (Messling 2020). Two fundamental aspects are relevant here.

On the one hand, this approach reverses the truth procedure by addressing the general from a concrete context. The general, which historiography poses as a question about an epistemic order of the world, is thereby compelled to acquire new plausibility at the micro-level. We find this exemplified in how generalised assumptions about early modern peoples' view of the world are challenged in the case of the miller Menocchio in Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (2013 [1976]). The miller Menocchio was not the least bit convinced of the divine order preached by the church, to which he opposed his own, entirely "realistic" idea of life. His fate opens a rift in our homogeneous conception of the estate-based early modern social order, and our understanding of how "simple" people in the late Middle Ages understood their world. Menocchio's particular, concrete understanding of world stands here before us as an obstacle, as a methodological challenge,

for even if the question posed to contexts like his can be generalised, his individual case cannot. For Carlo Ginzburg, this necessitated comparison with the work of anthropologists and their rejection of ethnocentrism, which led him to “the minute analysis of a circumscribed documentation, tied to a person who was otherwise unknown” (Ginzburg 1993, 22). Aptly describing this approach, Ginzburg notes that by “reducing the scale of observation, that which for another scholar could have been a simple footnote in a hypothetical monograph on the Protestant Reformation in Friuli was turned into a book” (Ginzburg 1993, 22).¹⁴

On the other hand, however, this reversal of perspective does not obscure the fact that the universal horizon is postulated here as a series of questions: it is the horizon that makes it possible to play with these different scales; it allows the particular to appear in the light of perspective (Revel 1996). If the universal in Badiou’s work finds its true power precisely in this sense, that is to say, as the event whose identity cannot be determined, then this also applies structurally to an approach such as microhistory, which begins by considering the particular. For while the concrete becomes all the more visible in the question of the general, the universal also becomes visible within the particular, and this happens by virtue of the fact that a question is posed to the particular from within a universally valid framework. The very act of addressing a human horizon thus holds an epistemological power. When experienced individually, as happens in moments of solidarity or liberation from the confines of restricted worlds, this act can indeed retain the character of an event.¹⁵

14 At the conference “Universalismes, hégémonies et identités”, which we organised in March 2022 as part of the ERC project “Minor Universality”, in cooperation with Leyla Dakhli and Mohamed Kerrou at the Académie tunisienne des sciences, des lettres et des arts (Beit al-Hikma) in Carthage, Giovanni Levi therefore insisted that the hermeneutic cultural and social sciences are not “sciences” in a strict sense, meaning they cannot generalise what is particular or specific. Rather, they offer plausible reasons for a general understanding. See <https://www.beitalhikma.tn/fr/colloque-universalismes-hegemonies-et-identites-17-18-mars-2022/> (last accessed 23 October 2022). See also Levi (2018).

15 Little could demonstrate this more clearly than the narrative through which Levi grounds an interview with the ERC team (ERC Minor Universality 2020). In a short village in the Piedmontese alps, to which the Levi family fled to escape deportation from the Nazis, and where Giovanni’s father joins forces with Leone Ginzburg, the father of Carlo Ginzburg, and the partisans, the young Giovanni digs out a medal from the cracks of a villa road through which Napoléon Bonaparte sent his loyal freedom fighters his “dernière pensée” from Saint Helena. In this story, which Giovanni Levi recounted to Markus Messling and Franck Hofmann in Venice in March 2023, rests, in nuce, the narrative of a humane resistance against the violence of National-Socialism, of a personal engagement, and thus the inner tension of *microstoria* (on this, see the forthcoming publication of our interview in volume 5 of the series *Beyond Universalism. Studies on the Contemporary*).

For a question of the universal that is thus transformed – in a secular age – into an epistemological problem, the narrative processes that are employed to interlink and weigh these various levels plays a central role. Ginzburg writes of *The Cheese and the Worms* that it “does not restrict itself to the reconstruction of an individual event; it narrates it” (Ginzburg 1993, 23). Out of the concrete contexts in which we seek the universal, this event becomes visible through procedures concerned with shaping perspective, establishing narrative stance, or extending the narrative. Tzvetan Todorov, for instance, noted of Roland Barthes’s late autobiographical trilogy *Roland Barthes, par Roland Barthes* (1975), *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* (1977), and *La chambre claire* (1980) that Barthes’ aim was not to develop a subjective perspective from any first-person form:

It was necessary, in order not to impose his truth upon others, to limit the field of application of his statements to the minimum: to himself. Thereby he did not necessarily opt for the subjective to the detriment of the objective; I am tempted to say: quite the contrary; for the “objective” is frequently no more than a personal fantasy, whereas to speak of oneself consists precisely in making oneself an object. Nor did he opt for the singular to the detriment of the universal: here again, the collective for which one commonly authorizes oneself to speak is often no more than a fiction; and Barthes’ final trilogy is certainly the most universal of all his writings (Todorov 1981, 453).

That is to say: for Todorov, the individuality that is most firmly situated in a place, and that is most specific, also appears most powerfully as universal. This is, on the one hand, because rather than simulate any kind of universality that would ultimately do nothing more than incorporate or annex the particular, it stands – in its idiosyncratic character – as the truest (most universal) representation of the particular. And on the other hand, it points in its very particularity most forcefully to the tension it must overcome in moving toward generality. It thus points to the universal, while simultaneously displacing this target.

For this reason, it makes sense not to think of universality as a scaled category or as an analytical level of aggregation, but rather to consider it from the perspective of concrete, embodied human experiences, within the spectrum of relations to the world. By “experience” we understand a process of directed formation of meaning (in a critical recourse to Husserl 1991). Considered phenomenologically, experience of a universal horizon is consequently a precondition for specific forms of appropriating reality, each time specifically incorporated in one’s habitus and translated into language. If the experience itself is “invisible”, it emerges, in language, as awareness, as practice.

Disengaging with ‘classical’, particularly Hegelian, aesthetics, the analysis of culture often distances itself from the claim that analysing narratives also means

analysing a form of consciousness.¹⁶ This skepticism is justified insofar as it rejects problematic presuppositions of the philosophy of spirit (*Geistphilosophie*). Our reflections on minor universality, however, assume that narratives express consciousness. This is not a “pure” consciousness in an idealistic sense, but one that is always already embodied in the processes of linguistically formulating concrete, material, social, political, and emotional factors. Consciousness is thus based here on a concept of narration which integrates the body that we are (*Leib*, not *Körper*).

Four aspects are decisive in these acts of “translation”: 1) embodied experience as linked to social practices; 2) language as a medium for producing “world”; 3) narration; and 4) the transposition of narrative structures to material forms of producing “world”, including such diverse forms as (oral and written) texts, cultural forums, and architecture.

First, in our apprehension of the world, biographical and cultural elements are always embodied. Hence experiences are always already related to the world and historically profound. When they are translated into language, a specific attitude toward reality and a specific production of the world emerges out of this embodiment. On the one hand, this is created in narration and can be described in aesthetic terms (Ranci re 2000). And on the other hand, experiences in and of the social context through which a subject lives unfold narrative dimensions beyond the written text and induce practices which structure social life (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). Perception, practice, and experience are situated in “the socially informed body” (Csordas 1990, 7; see also Mauss 2013 [1934]). As Tomas Csordas puts it, with reference to Bourdieu’s notion of practice: “if we begin with the lived world of perceptual phenomena, our bodies are not objects to us. Quite the contrary, they are an integral part of the perceiving subject” (Csordas 1990, 36). To understand how world is produced through the embodied and the situated, is to return a crucial capacity to experience.

Second, language is the medium of producing the world in which experiences attain awareness. We must consider that the natural languages (in the sense of French *langue*, not *langage*) necessarily produce “world” by expressing the world in a certain way, and not in another. We no longer understand this world-making in the deep hermeneutic sense as developed from Romantic thought (Trabant 1990), but in the sense that languages “colour” a perspective on the world, that is, they enable us to grasp the world in a historically and structurally specific way (Deutscher 2011; Trabant 2014). Languages thus possess a historical, semantic,

¹⁶ Today, for example, it is hard to think of Goethe’s *Faust* as a representative of “the German spirit”, a generalisable German consciousness of being in history. Both the late Adorno and the movement of deconstruction have permanently shaken the notion of a suspension of subjectivity in generalised conceptual discourse and of the identity of thought and world.

poetic surplus and never completely fuse together. Understanding that languages, individually and collectively, cannot be translated without loss or surplus into other languages, opens a relation to a cognitive position implying a universal understanding beyond the monolingual experience. This position does not exist *a priori*; it is only gained and incarnated within this constellation: it constitutes an understanding that both languages do not fully grasp a concept but exceed it in semantic determination; that both address a “third”, virtual concept, which refers to the universal core of understanding. The idea of “non-translatability” (Cassin 2014) therefore does not entail imprisonment in relativistic understandings of culture and human articulation. To the contrary, it means that we take a position “beyond”, where the process of translation has already taken place. Against this backdrop the capacity to translate proves to be the art of dealing with difficulties, allowing for the invention of a new “monde commun” (Cassin 2016, 9). And multilingualism proves to play a central role in the complexity of the world and for the question of what constitutes a shared horizon (Diagne 2014, 2022).

And yet, instrumental translation in a wider sense may also be a hindrance to a joint universal concern. In *Prisoners of Freedom* (2006), his study of foreign aid and human rights activism in Malawi and Zambia, Harri Englund has shown how translation of ostensibly universal notions, such as human rights, came to be defined in particular ways, steered by the rhetoric and interests of foreign donors and creditors. Through his fieldwork with foreign NGOs and local legal volunteers, Englund reveals how “human rights discourse – even as it asserts that all individuals are equals – can be deprived of its democratising potential and made to serve particular interests in society” (Englund 2006, 49). As he observes: “translation as a cultural and political process” can hamper the “situational characteristic” of human rights mobilisation, “obscured by human rights activists’ commitment to abstraction and universalism” (Englund 2006, 49).

Third, if Tim Parks’s answer to the polemic question of whether we really need stories is negative, he admits that there is nothing which shapes subjectivity more than narrations since the concept of *self* on which it is based is both unavoidable and essentially in need of explanation. Any explaining terminology, he argues, in itself already contains narratives (Parks 2015, 3–8). This declaration is true for subjects as much as for cultural collectives, organisations, or institutions (Mattingly 2013; Tinius 2018). Narrations are historically formed and subject to a multifarious dynamics. This becomes obvious even in the meta-narration of Western universalism itself. Narrations are not “simple” verbal processes. They are rather constitutive of identity and can materialise socially as reality (Koschorke 2018, 24). In narrations, forms of producing the world become manifest.

Lastly, this becomes particularly evident in the constitutive elements of museums – architecture, curating, and collections – and more so in such museums that

lay claim to represent “world” and encompass difference; hence in these fields of knowledge production and those cultural practices from which we departed in this introduction and to which we now wish to return. The creation of museums with such scope have been caught up since the nineteenth century in processes of managing, assembling, and creating differences of every imaginable kind and therefore in creating a kind of similarity, or the sense of a universal claim (Bennett 1995, Macdonald 2016). This is not just the case for ethnographic and anthropological museums; even if these have co-constituted the *méta-récit* of (imperial) modernity more than any other (Amselle 2016, Penny 2002). The post-literary narrative dimension of museums extends both outwards (from their collections to their exhibitions and architectures) and inwards (from universal ambition to situated provenance investigations), depending on their interpretation, use, and construction (Macleod, Hanks, and Hale 2012, Martinez-Turek and Sommer-Sieghart 2009, Tinius and Zinnenburg Carroll 2020). The work taking place within them – collections management, provenance research, and the practice of curating – form part of their three-dimensional poetic and political narratives (Lidchi 1997, Macdonald 2022, Oswald and Tinius 2022, Savoy 2022). The curatorial work of assembling universal museum collections is a constant practice of witnessing the constructions and destructions of worlds. Their architectural narratives, too, are no less caught up in the friction between the global or universal horizons they create, and the particular places in whose narratives universal museums are entangled, which may variously take on or be refused by their concrete contexts (Raad 2014, Tinius 2020, Tschumi and Cheng 2003, Yarrow 2019). The “constructed narratives” (Adjaye 2016) of their architecture pertain not just to the buildings; they are also entangled with the interests, interpretations, and refusals that visitors bring. As material creations within the symbolic construction of cultures and societies, (universal museum) architecture is an expression of epochal consciousness and, as a practice, also an instrument of its fashioning (see Hofmann 2017). Taken together, narratives in museums – and the forms of “world” that they engender – allow for a host of questions to be opened about their possibilities in thinking shared and divided humanity.

4 In our present: A search

“Minor universality” is (also) a research project. It was conceived and launched in Berlin to then find a home in Saarbrücken.¹⁷ This shift is emblematic of the underlying concept that defines its structure – of a universality that is no longer understood to mean the universalisation of the centre. The centre of our project is now the peripheral area between Germany and France – a region that considers itself to be the “heart of Europe”, even though its infrastructure and social status belong more to Europe’s margins. Yet the project was also funded by the European Research Council, that is to say, from the political centre of the European Union in Brussels. Hence it was all the more important that the project develop multi-polar ways of thinking its paths and aims – that right from the start it fashions its epistemological framework in concert with partners in Mexico, Tunis, Hong Kong – and beyond. When the project first got going, it seemed important to us to emphasise human horizons and to rethink universality in a moment that increasingly sees identity as something inherent to the self and closed off, as something that limits and isolates the (collective) self. Today, this concern seems more urgent than ever.

This would mean that the problem of constructing “world” in the aftermath of Western universalism is also an attempt to find a common scholarly narrative. The idea was to structure our methods and insights from the very beginning together with horizons of knowledge and experience that lay beyond our own. But our attempt to realise a multi-polar research project based on a common narrative that we developed in coming together and exchanging our experiences and ideas – that is to say, a narrative that would be concrete, embodied, and shared – repeatedly failed in an almost symbolic way. The list of our unsuccessful attempts to bring people together is long, as is that of the reasons why: borders closed by the pandemic; delays of a work visa; overworked immigration authorities; *Fiktionsbescheinigungen*, as they are called in German (literally: “certificates of fiction”) – an immigration status that confers an unsatisfactory kind of residency, allowing an international researcher, for instance, to remain in the country while prohibiting international travel; delays in visas being issued and related travel restrictions to international conferences for non-European participants; cancellation of project meetings, conferences, and get-togethers; interruptions of field research; and not least personal troubles and health problems, long Covid, and pandemic-related deaths.

The further the project progressed, the clearer it became that these problems were not acute individual cases, isolated failures, or simply bad luck, but that they

¹⁷ See <https://www.uni-saarland.de/forschen/minor-universality.html> (last accessed 22 December 2022).

corresponded to the systematically produced asymmetries of our world. In 2020, Achille Mbembe posed the question of a “universal right to breathe” (“le droit universel à la respiration”), which evidently resonates with the racist violence against George Floyd (“I cannot breathe”):

If, indeed, Covid-19 is the spectacular expression of the planetary impasse in which humanity finds itself today, then it is a matter of no less than reconstructing a habitable Earth to give all of us the breath of life. We must reclaim the lungs of our world with a view to forging new ground. Humankind and biosphere are one. Alone, humanity has no future. Are we capable of rediscovering that each of us belongs to the same species, that we have an indivisible bond with all life? Perhaps that is the question – the very last – before we draw our last dying breath (Mbembe 2021).

As the world’s nations compare the statistics that track their rising and falling cases of Covid, engendering a competition among countries of the Global North, the same international solidarity that rushes forth united against Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine seems to vanish when it comes to open patents and ties to the Global South. Globalisation and a universalist consciousness of “world” are not one and the same. Neither capitalism nor a functionalist concept of freedom, the identitarian reinterpretation of particularity and situatedness, or the nationally shaped global-Western world order have produced a convincing new awareness of humanity in the void left by modernity’s great universalisms (secular monotheism, liberalism, Marxism). Instead, the Western world – finding itself unable to breathe (Mbembe 2021), while once again locked in confrontation with post-Soviet imperial power, united along the borders of communist ecumenism – is now searching for a unifying narrative that cannot be found. The West is no longer – *can* no longer be thought and enacted as – monolithically synonymous with universalistic ideals of freedom, equality, and fraternity as human solidarity. But not only in the West, critical reflection on a post-universalist self-understanding has aimed to fill this vacuum with an identitarian relativism, conversely giving rise to new forms of identitarian self-assurances characterised by nativism, identity politics rooted in anti-modernist essentialisms, neo-fascism, and racist ideology. Faced with this relativism, universalist arguments are the strongest we have. David Scott put it aptly when he described this tension as inherently instable and uncertain:

It is a moment when hitherto established and authoritative conceptual paradigms and political projects (those defined in relation to Marxism and cultural nationalism, for instance, or various admixtures of nationalism and socialism, and so on) seem no longer adequate to the tasks of the present, and when, at the same time, new paradigms and projects have yet to assert themselves fully in the place of the old. These essays inhabit, in other words, a sort of Gramscian interregnum, a transitional moment that I shall characterize as “after postcoloniality” (Scott 1999, 10).

As part of our *Minor Universality* initiative, we are exploring various practices and media that claim to seek and collectively fashion narratives from locations beyond these responses to critiques of universalism, beyond relativism and identitarian particularism. We aim to understand how a new consciousness of universality is now tentatively *being produced* in contemporary social practices and cultural expressions such as oral transmissions and narrations of the self, literatures and archives, films and festivals, or curatorial spaces and museums. Such narration tries to think what we share by attending to small things, minor things – to produce “world” from experiences that always remain concrete. Constantly moving between the scales of the individual and the whole, each individual project has grappled with the problems that face multi-polar attempts to conceive of “world” from a minor position, and with the urgency of this political endeavour. This is apparent even with the publishing of this volume itself. The fact that it can appear open access, funded by the European Union, allows its ideas to be disseminated free of cost, worldwide. And yet this opportunity also means a problem is emerging: funding an open-access book, which is increasingly becoming the standard of scholarship and thus constitutive for the dominant, officially defined discourse of “excellence”, remains a privilege available to but a few, often Western, research projects.

What these difficulties indicate is that we may not want any longer to derive a commonly conceived universality from any philosophical *a priori*, but from concrete projects and situations. One such concrete practice that was fundamental to our project is that of artistic production and curatorial work in, at, and beyond the museum. From the beginning, the project has sought to incorporate artistic research and practice as a form of narration into our collaborative work, as an epistemological and aesthetic displacement of specific scientific modes and forms of thought. This was why we developed an artist residency as part of the project, selecting seven artists with various aesthetic approaches in the fall of 2020 to join our dialogue in two residencies each in June and September 2021 at the House of World Cultures (HKW) in Berlin. In June 2021 we travelled with all the artists to Athens, and in March 2022 to Tunis, where we held research colloquia and seminars with the Académie de Carthage (“Beït al-Hikma”) and the Centre des arts vivants de Radès. These residencies were accompanied by an attempt to think about and experience the decentring of epistemological production in our research project from the point of view – and in the language and form of – artistic practice. These artists’ work foregrounded concrete, embodied, acoustic, and shaped aspects of narration and its forms.¹⁸

¹⁸ We were delighted that these artists accepted our invitation to cooperate: the writers Camille de Toledo and Adania Shibli, the multimedia artist Emeka Ogboh, the filmmaker Filipa César, and



Figure 7: Congress Hall Berlin, 18 May 1980, Credit: Herbert Orth. Public Domain.

The positions developed by our artistic residencies derived from situated forms of doubt and from engaging with dominant forms of discourse through the minor; they share an urgency to work with the birth of a world within the ruins of the former West. And in speaking of ruins, we do not use the term metaphorically or playfully (see Figure 7). The artists were invited to respond, react, or altogether develop their own minor practices in response to the exhibition space, chosen to be the central auditorium of the former Congress Hall, now Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin. This space is laden with historical and contemporary significance pertinent to our project, since it was gifted to West Berlin by the United States as a token of the country's commitment to liberty, liberalism, modernism, and the "free world". However, when the free-floating modernist roof of the Congress Hall collapsed in 1980, a Western symbol of US universalism crumbled with it, offering us an apt starting point for our exhibition.

Taking inspiration from the ambivalent nickname – the "pregnant oyster" – that Berliners gave the building, on account of its form, where the HKW has found a home since 1989, our project asks how horizons of a shared world are born out of

the curators of radio SAVVYZAAR, Lynhan Balatbat-Helbock and Kelly Krugman, as well as the curator of the archive SAVVY.doc, Sagal Farah, from the Berlin art space SAVVY Contemporary. For more information, see <http://www.hkw.de/minoruniversality> (last accessed 23 October 2022).

a concrete and situated narrative. The oyster as a queering animal that changes its gender at will, occasionally producing precious surprises, ones which are fragile and valuable, is a metaphor for this meandering search. The exhibition *The Pregnant Oyster – Doubts on Universalism* (June–July 2022) was thus deliberately staged both in Berlin and beyond at the HKW, arguably a site that represents Western universalism and its questioning. We hoped to harness our learning process in order to confront the ways in which notions of the multipolar and the minor are being increasingly tied to geographic locations, with a design that resisted being trapped in identitarian closures or any insistence on what is properly one's own. As Okwui Enwezor conceives of it, geographical distance is no longer a marker of alterity; we live in an age of “intense proximity” (2012), he writes, in which near presence can just as intensely allow us to bring together other productions of “world”. At the same time, the loss of seemingly easy global access that is increasingly being imposed by the climate-driven urgency to change our travel habits is another deep and painful loss of opportunity for dialogue and cosmopolitan exchange, which raises new questions.

The exhibition *The Pregnant Oyster – Doubts on Universalism* brings us back to the “game of scales” that unfolded in the French pavilion in Zineb Sedira's work – to the minor details in the major narratives that opened this introduction. In an unfathomable diversity of ways and places, the minor forms they represent have always already begun to produce horizons of a shared world – to realise hope and humanity – from the situated, embodied experiences that we all possess. This volume assembles some of their idiosyncrasies, investigations, and reflections for our present.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Veiled Sentiments. Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Adjaye, David. *Constructed Narrations*. Ed. P. Allison. Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016.
- Adorno, Theodor W. “Kultur and Culture.” Transl. Mark Kalbus. *Social Text* 27.2 (99) (1 June 2009): 145–158.
- Alemani, Cecilia. “The Milk of Dreams”. *The Milk of Dreams: Biennale Arte 2022: Short Guide*. Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. 44–47.
- Amselle, Jean-Loup. *Le Musée exposé*. Paris: lignes, 2016.
- Badiou, Alain. *Saint Paul. The Foundation of Universalism*. Transl. Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003 [1977].
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Introduction by Neil Badmington. Transl. Annette Lavers. London: Vintage, 2009 [1957].
- Bennett, Tony. *Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995.

- Bogue, Ronald. "The Minor". *Gilles Deleuze. Key Concepts*. Ed. Charles J. Stivale. London, New York: Routledge, 2005. 131–141.
- Boltanski, Luc, and Eve Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2005 [1999].
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Transl. Richard Nice. Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press, 1984 [1979].
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009.
- Cassin, Barbara. "Introduction". *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*. Ed. Barbara Cassin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. XVII–XX.
- . Ed. *Après Babel, traduire*. Catalogue of the exhibition at the Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM). Marseille, Arles: Actes Sud / Mucem, 2016.
- Christ, Julia. *L'oubli de l'universel: Hegel critique du libéralisme*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2021.
- Csordas, Tomas J. "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology." *Ethos* 18.1 (1990): 5–47.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Kleine Schriften*. Transl. K.D. Schacht. Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1980.
- . *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Transl. D. W. Smith & M. A. Greco. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 [1993].
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*. Transl. Dana Polan. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1975].
- . *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia II*. Transl. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 [1980].
- . *Kafka. Für eine kleine Literatur*. Transl. Burkhart Kroeber. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019 [1975].
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues II*. Revised edition. Transl. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007 [1977].
- Deutscher, Guy. *Through the Language Glass. Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*. London: Arrow Books, 2011.
- Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. "L'universel latéral comme traduction". *Les pluriels de Barbara Cassin ou le partage des équivoques*. Eds. Philippe Büttgen, Michèle Gendreau-Massaloux and Xavier North. Lormont: Le Bord de l'eau, 2014. 243–256.
- . *De langue à langue : l'hospitalité de la traduction*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2022.
- Di Cesare, Donatella. *Heidegger, die Juden, die Shoah*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2016.
- Englund, Harri. *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Enwezor, Okwui. "Intense proximité: de la disparition des distances." *Intense proximité. Une anthologie du proche et du lointain. La Triennale 2012*. Eds. Okwui Enwezor, Mélanie Bouteloup, Abdellah Karroum, Émilie Renard, and Claire Staebler. Paris: Éditions Artlys, 2012. 18–36.
- ERC Minor Universality. "Universalisme & histoires concrètes. Entretien avec Giovanni Levi." *Universalisme & ...* Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZyqYDA3KhA&t=9s>, last accessed, 16 April 2023.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. Transl. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1962 [1961].
- . "This is the Voice of Algeria." *A Dying Colonialism*. Transl. Haakon Chevalier. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965 [1959]. 69–97.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It." *Critical Inquiry* 20.1 (1993): 10–35.
- . *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Transl. John and Anne C. Tedeschi. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013 [1976].

- Hall, Stuart, and Paddy Whannel. Eds. *The Popular Arts. Selected Writings*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2018 [1965].
- Hofmann, Franck. “De/Konstruktionen des Südens – Die Méditerranée im planetaren Horizont der *documenta 14*.” *kritische Berichte* 4 (2017): 10–17.
- Hofmann, Franck, and Markus Messling. “On the ends of universalism.” *The Epoch of Universalism / L'époque de l'universalisme (1769–1989)*. Eds. Franck Hofmann and Markus Messling. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021. 1–39.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Transl. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1944].
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ding und Raum*. Ed. K.-H. Hahnengreß and S. Rapic. Hamburg: Meiner, 1991.
- Koschorke, Albrecht. *Fact and Fiction. Elements of a General Theory of Narrative*. Transl. Joel Golb. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Laidlaw, James. *The Subject of Virtue. An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Levi, Giovanni. “La storia: Scienza delle domande generali e delle risposte locali.” *Psiche* 2 (2018): 361–377.
- Lidchi, Henrietta. “The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures”. *Representation. Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. Milton Keynes: SAGE, 1997. 151–222.
- Macdonald, Sharon. “New Constellations of Difference in Europe’s 21st-Century Museumscape.” *Museum Anthropology* 39.1 (2016): 4–19.
- Macleod, Suzanne, Laura H. Hanks, and Jonathan Hale. Eds. *Museum Making. Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions*. London, New York: Routledge, 2012.
- . Ed. *Doing Diversity in Museums and Heritage. A Berlin Ethnography*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2023.
- Martinez-Turek, Charlotte, and Monika Sommer-Sieghart. Eds. *Storyline. Narrationen im Museum*. Wien: Turia + Kant, 2009.
- Mattingly, Cheryl. “Moral Selves and Moral Scenes: Narrative Experiments in Everyday Life.” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 78.3 (2013): 301–327.
- Mauss, Marcel. “Notion de technique du corps.” *Sociologie et Anthropologie*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2013 [1934]. 363–372.
- Mbembe, Achille. “The Universal Right to Breathe”. Transl. Carolyn Shread. *Critical Inquiry* 47.2 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1086/711437> (last accessed 24 April 2023).
- Messling, Markus. *Universalität nach dem Universalismus. Über frankophone Literaturen der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2019.
- . “La difficile fabrique d’une revue « globale ».” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 75.3–4 (2020): 667–679. <https://www.doi.org/10.1017/ahss.2021.7>.
- . “Mit Barthes: Subjektivität und Universalität.” *Bilder in Bewegung. Transdisziplinäre Ansichten des Bildlichen zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft*. Eds. Patricia Gwozdz, Tobias Kraft, Markus Lenz. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021. 35–48.
- . *L’universel après l’universalisme. Des littératures francophones du contemporain*. Préface de Souleymane Bachir Diagne. Transl. Olivier Mannoni. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2023.
- Oswald, Margareta von, and Jonas Tinius. “Introduction: Across Anthropology.” *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*. Eds. Jonas Tinius and Margareta von Oswald. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020. 17–42.
- Pamuk, Orhan. *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist. The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 2009*. Cambridge/MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- . *The Innocence of Objects: The Museum of Innocence, Istanbul*. New York: Abrams, 2012.

- Parks, Tim. *Where I'm Reading From. The Changing World of Books*. New York: The New York Review of Books Publishers, 2015.
- Parr, Adrian. Ed. *The Deleuze Dictionary*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
- Penny, H. Glenn. *Objects of Ethnography: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*. Durham/NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Raad, Walid. *Walkthrough*. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2014.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Le partage du sensible : esthétique et politique*. Paris: la fabrique, 2000.
- Revel, Jacques. Ed. *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'expérience*. Paris: Gallimard / Le Seuil, 1996.
- Savoy, Bénédicte. *Africa's Struggle for Its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.
- Scott, David. *Refashioning Futures. Criticism After Postcoloniality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988 [1985]. 271–313.
- Tinius, Jonas. "Porous Membranes: Alterity, Hospitality, and Difference in a Berlin District Gallery." *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*. Eds. Jonas Tinius and Margareta von Oswald. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020. 255–276.
- . "Capacity for Character. Fiction, Ethics, and the Anthropology of Conduct". *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie Sociale* 26.3 (2018): 345–360.
- Tinius, Jonas, and Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll. "Phantom Palaces: Prussian Centralities and Humboldtian Horizontalities." *Re-Centring the City. Global Mutations of Socialist Modernity*. Eds. Jonathan Bach and Michal Murawski. London: UCL Press, 2020. 90–103.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Last Barthes". Transl. Richard Howard. *Critical Inquiry* 7.3 (Spring 1981): 449–454.
- Trabant, Jürgen. *Traditionen Humboldts*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990.
- . *Globalesisch oder was? Ein Plädoyer für Europas Sprachen*. Munich: Beck, 2014.
- Tschumi, Bernard, and Irene Cheng. Eds. *The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the 21st Century*. New York: The Monacelli Press / Columbia Books of Architecture, 2003.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*. New York: New Press, 2006.
- Yarrow, Thomas. *Architects: Portraits of a Practice*. Ithaca/NY, London: Cornell University Press, 2019.

