

TO SEE

AND

TO SPEAK

Long Leaf Distro

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I write this introduction from the library of a small town I've never previously been to. The weather is calm, cold but warmer in the sun. There is no traffic save for a lone car passing by every fifteen minutes or so. There is an old man reading the paper and a teenager listening to music on one of the library's computers. Through this calm I swear I can hear every flashbang explosion, every teargas cannister ringing in the streets of Chicago or Portland. I hear every scream and every guttural sob echoing from the lungs of those watching their loved ones be kidnapped, beaten, killed by ICE or by the police. I hear every bomb dropped, every bullet fired in Palestine, in Sudan and every other locale in which the violence of the nation-state is brought to its logical conclusion. The calm around me is deafening, smothering, filled to the teeth with all of the carnage and hellfire enacted just out of view. People look around but see nothing, they talk (or at least I hear their words) but they say nothing.

We are all struggling to make sense of the world around us, how it is changing, how it has remained the same. We fall woefully short of even the basic task of articulating our own subjective experience with any directness. We parrot sound bites we hear from viral videos, give in to conspiratorial thinking whenever an event pushes the bounds of our accepted worldview, and rely on others to tell us what to think. Even among the so-called "politically minded", the "radicals", the most that the majority can seem to muster is an enthusiastic repetition of syllables they memorized from books written a hundred years ago. They mistake their reactive pattern recognition for meaningful analysis. They posture as the "enlightened", destined to lead "the masses" while they engross themselves in a glossed-up version of "which shaped block goes in the square hole".

For those of us who desire the end of this world of death machines, who yearn for a life worth living, we must first learn how to really see the world around us for what it is. We must see through the spectacle, the glossy images that obfuscate the way that things really are. We must see the ways that we are suffering, see how that suffering is connected to the suffering of others. We must develop the tools necessary to carry out meaningful analysis of why we are where we are if we are ever to have any possibility of getting somewhere else.

As we learn to see, we must learn how to speak about what we have seen, not simply make noise in the form of words. We must develop the skills to articulate to others (and in many ways to ourselves) the suffering we have seen and the causes of that suffering. We must learn to speak earnestly, as individuals claiming no authority. We must learn to communicate to others the depths of our desire for something else, feeling our way about every deliberate nuance and every jagged contradiction.

And as learn to speak, we must learn to listen. We must understand that our ability to meaningfully communicate and advocate for ourselves, for our desires, inevitably relies on the ability of others to do the same. We must help one another to develop these skills, push one another to hone them, challenge ourselves to be ever more exact in our descriptions and critiques of what is and what could be.

The collection of words that follows is my attempt at articulating this need to see, to speak, and to listen. And if I fail at highlighting the importance of that task, consider it a challenge to prove you've already learned to speak.

To See

It is terrifying, the ease with which our own vision can betray us. Or if not betray, then mislead us into believing we hold knowledge that we do not. We convince ourselves that when we have witnessed something, observed it for ourselves, we understand all that is to be known about that which we have observed. To observe is to know, to know is to reaffirm one's understanding of the world. We remain, largely, ignorant of all the ways our field of vision has been narrowed and tinted by the media we consume, locales we inhabit, people with whom we share space. We simply take our first reaction to what we observe as fact, internalizing a subjective experience as objective truth.

This is how the vast majority of us navigate the world. We rely on instinctual reaction to the world around us to feel our way around in the dark. We are comfortable, complacent in this darkness. Curiosity might expose our ignorance, disrupt this comfort, and so we rarely seek to illuminate our surroundings any more than is absolutely necessary to make it from one work day to the next, one paycheck to the next, one moment of rest to the next. We cannot make out the shapes more than a few moments ahead and so we fail to make sense of where our footsteps are headed beyond the hope that they lead to some momentary respite.

We are trained, conditioned, domesticated to seek no further clarity of our situation beyond what is necessary for our immediate survival. Since childhood we have been fitted with blinders that allow only the narrowest sliver of light to enter. If we ever try to expand that sliver, we are beaten back, reminded of our place, told that as we age we will come to

understand that sliver as the truth, as all that is true. Depending on where we fall within the relations of class, race, gender we are prescribed a life sentence. At best we are promised work until death with a few carrots along the way to keep us in line. For those not offered the carrots, for the Black, the indigenous, the queer, the trans, the targeted nonwhite, death is all that is promised.

Even when we begin to question if our field of view really contains all that is, we often fall into the trap of reinforcing our limits. We may seek out new forms of media to tell us where to look, what to critique, who to question, but we struggle to move beyond seeking prescription. We struggle to begin the task of thinking for ourselves.

This task is made all the more difficult by the prevalence of so-called radical organizations claiming to hold the secret to understanding the truth of this world, but who are far more interested in expanding the ranks of their disciples than empowering those new-found disciples to develop their own analysis and worldview. They have the “right” slogans, show up to the “right” protests, make the “right” banners to signal that they have the “right” ideas. Their ideology quickly becomes orthodoxy, another set of prescriptions to be dealt out when the corresponding color begins to flash on the screen.

These organizations feed on of the constant influx of people who are genuinely beginning the process of shaking off the blinders this world has beaten into them. But just as these blinders start to come loose, these orgs swoop in to reattach blinders of their own. Maybe the slits are a little larger, allowing for a bit more light to make it in, but they remain a limitation guiding the wearer down a prescribed path.

If we wish to really shake off limitations, the blinders this world forces onto us, we must undertake the task of developing our own ability to analyze. We must begin to intentionally view the world around us at its most fundamental level. We must engage with the myriads of horrors at their skeletal foundation. We need to learn to see the relations (capital, anti-Blackness, cisheteropatriarchy, etc) that govern the systems around us and we must see the ways in which we live serve to reinforce or undermine those social relations.

In order to see these relations as they are we need to learn which questions to ask, or more fundamentally we need to learn how to ask meaningful questions in the first place. This is a learned skill, it takes practice. The only way to develop the skill of asking meaningful questions is to try asking them, following them as long as they go, and analyzing where you end up. I cannot dictate for you what a meaningful question will inherently look like as its meaning can only be determined by the one asking. That said, something I keep in mind when formulating a question, in an effort to keep that question meaningful for me, is “does this question offer the possibility of helping me to better understand *why* the world is a particular way or *how* it came to be that way”.

This questioning allows us to follow the thread of a given relation from its material manifestations back to its socially reinforced roots. In turn we learn to follow from root to material manifestation. We become adept at identifying the specific iterations of broad violences in our own locales, at seeing where those violences arise even in the early stages of their foundations being laid.

A similar consideration I hold in mind is “does this question help me to understand what actions I might take in pursuit of undermining the systems, and the relations that reproduce them, I claim to be against”.

This last consideration sparks a new thought of its own, a new question: “What do I desire?”. This question can range from the immediate desire of our daily needs and wants to the largest existential questions imaginable. Most of us have experience with the former, we are often told (implicitly or explicitly) the latter is impossible to consider given our powerlessness as individuals. I’m interested in pushing against this assumption of impossibility. I do not believe that we are powerless, as individuals or otherwise.

But in order to really position ourselves towards the worlds we desire, to position ourselves against the relations that give rise to the systems we are learning to recognize as death machines, we must move beyond simply observing. To meaningfully desire something different of this world we need to do more than just see.

We need to learn to speak.

To Speak

To learn to see is to learn to identify and analyze the relations that govern the world around us. But in order to more fully develop the skills of identification and analysis we must simultaneously develop the skill of articulation, of communication. Whether through writing or speaking aloud, formally or informally, the act of articulation helps us to hone our skills and more accurately describe the state of things.

When we attempt to put into words the analysis previously confined to our mind, we learn just how difficult the act of communication really is. What might make sense intuitively in our head becomes vomit on a page. Reading back my own type often makes me question if I even had anything meaningful to say in the first place. It can be incredibly frustrating to feel something intuitively, strongly, internally but be unable to accurately reproduce the thoughts that gave rise to those feelings externally. But it is through this effort of externalization that analysis really begins to take actionable shape.

By externalizing our analysis through speaking with others or in writing for ourselves, we are able to have that analysis reflected back to us. We are able to pick it apart with more clarity, more flexibility, and some distance that allows us to intentionally craft a more coherent framework. We can identify inconsistencies in our thoughts, note weaknesses and dead ends in our claims. We can read over our thoughts through specific lenses to highlight any obvious blind spots we've overlooked. When we speak with others, we get insight into the blind spots we were never going to identify on our own.

Many view the task of articulation as something that should only occupy the time of the so-called “author”, “theorist”, “expert”. Many feel that articulation is reserved for those who “have something meaningful to say”. My response to this is fuck an author, fuck a theorist, fuck an expert. You exist in this world as much as anyone else. Your suffering is as worthy of articulation as anyone else’s. You have as much stake in the paths this world may go down as anyone else. The desires you hold are worth just as much air or ink as anyone else’s.

Fundamentally, articulation belongs to all who desire to better understand why this world is the way that it is. Articulation belongs to all of us who desire something else from this world. To circle back to the end of the previous section, if we really do want something else of this world (a life worth living, perhaps) articulation helps us to find our co-conspirators in that pursuit.

If we really want to live differently (and I fucking want to live differently), the practice of articulation is a necessary exercise in the development of our ability to analyze the relations we exist within and of our ability to advocate for the ways we wish to live. It isn’t something to leave to others, you are the only person who can ever possibly speak for you. You are the only one who knows exactly the ways in which this world causes you to suffer. You are the only one who knows what it is to exist within the specific intersection of relations that you embody. Nobody can speak for you, and anyone who claims to have this ability is either selling you something or selling you.

You have to speak for yourself and help others to do the same.

As we learn to meaningfully speak towards a purposeful articulation of the world around us, the task expands into helping others to do the same. Our ability to analyze and to speak meaningfully will always be limited by the ability of others to analyze and to speak. The point of articulation cannot simply be to make a photo-realistic tapestry of our world, to sit in an empty room waiting to be admired, but to connect with others whose articulations overlap, conflict, push beyond our own.

Articulation is a tool of communication, of working, individually and communally, to illuminate the paths between us as well as the potential paths ahead. The more of us who hone our ability to see and to speak the better lit those paths become, the further we can see in the darkness. There is no right way to desire, to suffer, to speak or to see. We grow together by learning to listen to the nuances, the specifics, the commonalities and uniqueness of the experience of others. When we lean towards one another with an earnest curiosity, we help to encourage the development of the skills we need to really change things.

If we cannot speak, if we continue to allow our thoughts and desires to be dictated to us, prescribed to us, the path ahead will remain bleak and dead ended. I will not tell you that learning to see and learning to speak suddenly makes everything clear. We are still surrounded on all sides by machines of annihilation so massive they seem inherent to the landscape. But we cannot fight what we cannot see, we cannot actualize what cannot articulate. The fight for a life worth living requires so much more than words.

But it does require words. So. What do you want?

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