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Movement

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The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born, in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear. Gramsci

Endless words are coursing through my mind in the constant mobility—and non-stop thought, sleepless, whirring unstoppable brain of these weeks; Sydney, Hong Kong, Paris, Madrid, Hong Kong, Taipei, Hong Kong, Sydney, and places in between.

When I'm sitting on the back step at home, looking at the planes flying low over my house, landing and taking off from Sydney Airport, wondering where they're going and coming from, I want to be moving, but now that I *am* moving, it is immobility that accompanies me and I'm feeling the weight of travel at every step, lugging heavy bags, carrying too much, passing through worlds that have a visceral presence and immediacy that I can smell. The night I arrive, it is Oct 31st in Hong Kong—Halloween, which is usually a huge party and great crush in the streets—tear gas and pepper spray are being used to disperse mask-wearing revellers just 5 minutes from where I'm staying. It's now illegal to wear a mask and the absurdity of this 'emergency measure' is never more clearly demonstrated than in the attempt to suppress the local expression of a popular cultural form, appropriated by a population that believes in ghosts.

I've been moving with these protests ever since they started months ago, walking, in my mind, following the paths of protesters in every march through these familiar streets, where I used to live. I am hearing the sounds echoing through what used to be my local mall, where a fervent song, sung by spontaneously gathered masses fills the space. It echoes with a resonant, unstoppable force that extends, spreading through the city, a cloud of stirring sound. Malls, designed only for endless consumption, are occupied by this new plangent production, a sonorous vibration, a reverberant roar that envelops space, becoming a form of armour that

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all the rubber bullets, beanbag rounds, tear gas and pepper spray cannot penetrate. Armour becomes amour, a defensive, projective topophilia.²

Now that I'm here, I see it really is a war-zone, with pitched battles in the streets a constant feature of everyday life. This is normalised so that people make small adjustments to their daily movements to take into account that a road might be blocked, or a rally might be planned or that train or bus services might be suspended. As in war zones—and in any context in which the flow of information is curtailed for security reasons—rumours abound, becoming the shape of news that takes hold in viral form.

On the surface, there have been no deaths in these events¹, and though there have been a number of serious injuries in the protests, these seem sporadic and atypical. But everywhere I am hearing stories of deaths and disappearances. Nobody knows. An increase in apparent suicides, people falling off tall buildings. Events hushed up. Families threatened, silenced by various pressures brought to bear on them. So far there have been over three thousand people arrested, it's hard to track them. There are variations on numbers of people admitted to hospitals after beatings, allegations of sexual abuse of young women and men during arrests and detention. Police violence is only investigated by the police, if it is investigated at all; complaints are useless. It will take years for the two to three thousand so far arrested to be processed by the courts—exponentially longer than the time it took for the much smaller number arrested and imprisoned after the Umbrella Movement in 2014.

If the characteristics of martial law include curfew and the suspension of civil law, civil rights and habeus corpus, then a kind of unofficial, unannounced virtual 'martial law' is operational here. There is a 'curfew by capital' in place, by virtue of the MTR corporation's arbitrary suspension of services; sometimes it ends at 9pm, sometimes at 11.30pm, frequently, almost normally, the Airport Express only stops between the airport and the terminal at Hong Kong Station. The airport itself is now quieter than it has ever been. It is now more of a transit hub - people are passing through but not coming into the city. You will see the notably low numbers of people who wait at baggage carousels incoming to Hong Kong. The MTR is no longer crowded in peak hour because people are boycotting it, out of anger about its sporadic operation and its active impedence of the movement of protestors. Features of the efficient city—the MTR, the Octopus card—are now clearly demonstrated to be instruments of crowd control and surveillance.

It was easy to think at first that the protests were of most use to the US, happy to see China discredited in the middle of a trade war—but although there has been a certain kind of ritualistic use of the US and UK flags, everyone is aware of the ineffectiveness of appeals to Western countries who formerly exercised a kind of moral power they no longer possess. Then there is a tendency to see 'Beijing' as a kind of monolith that's calling the shots, what is becoming increasingly clear is that there is no consensus even there: that power is a fragile thing, even and perhaps especially in a totalitarian state. There are factions in China whose interests are served by the continuation of the Hong Kong protests, because they discredit Xi Jinping's overstepping of authority; the Hong Kong Government is ineffective because it cannot back down without losing face. (Some say that it won't be long now before Carrie Lam becomes 'very ill' and is forced to step down for 'health reasons', as a circuit breaker).

I've heard the situation described as the 'miserable tranquillity' of the city at present: it's evident that there's been a huge economic impact but there is also an eerie peace between the regular outbreaks of violence and protest, the quiet of a place that has taken itself back from

the onslaught of overwhelming tourism. There is no panic, just a movement that continues, with the particular and characteristic rhythms that belong uniquely to the place.

Notes

1. Four days after this was written, Chow Tsz Lok, a young student pursued by police during a protest, died from injuries received in a fall in a carpark. Massive protests followed. A week later, the universities became battlegrounds, thousands more were arrested; on November 24, district council elections saw a landslide win (in 90% of seats) by pro-democracy forces .
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC_L_4mlGWl