

Published in Moscow Art Magazine, 2020

Zeigam Azizov

“Self-made men”: Freedom as the condition of one’s own making

In this text I will argue for the notion of freedom as it is projected to the past and the future, which is a cultural process and this process is a ‘long revolution’.¹ In this on-going revolution, art is a technique of making images as the condition of one’s own making.

The question of freedom as a project never fully realised, yet as a discourse it was always central and clearly one of the most difficult ideas to define, it is because freedom is the human condition and this condition is paradoxically stipulated by the absence of freedom. The absence which defines the presence and the impossibility of definition opens up the possibility of the temporal engagement with the absent ‘other’, memorised in the collective consciousness, therefore any form of freedom also involves understanding of memory in the accusative case. ‘Memory in the accusative case’ means that memory is always already memory of the other, of what is absent and remembering means the liberation of ones’ own existence through the recognition of the other. It is also true of forgetting which the denial of the recognition is. This paradoxical ‘pharmacological effect’ provided by memory is the condition of the possibility of freedom. In this sense the possibility of freedom is the struggle which demands a constant invention of technics, which is the goal of art as well.

What is the possibility of freedom? Is it still possible to think of new ways of freedom despite failures of many models of freedom previously? The notion of ‘freedom’ is a complicated term and it is a fuzzy term, which never comes under any strict category, but the notion of ‘possibility’ is another difficult and fuzzy term. Their combination therefore is the emergence of complexity and difficulty at the same time. To provide a precise answer to this question is an

impossible task. Speaking of these terms, like ‘freedom’ ‘possibility’ ‘memory in the accusative case’, however, opens up a new terrain for thinking of existence differently from the previous philosophy. Bringing together these terms is an opening-up the way towards thinking about freedom as a possibility. Any technique of freedom itself emerges from the act of making decisions which is also an act of making art. It is the probability of freedom which turns the freedom into the possible. Making art in this sense is a step towards freedom.

Earlier this year BBC News headlines demonstrated the arrest of Julian Assange and it was the most disturbing image I have seen for many years. I was absolutely disturbed by witnessing the failure of the Western democracy represented in this image which I perceived as “the end of democracy”. At the same time this image has opened a new way of thinking of the possible freedom. Just around this time of Assange’s arrest, my friend, a magnificent artist Isaac Julien showed me his new project about the life of Frederick Douglass. Douglass was the slave and didn’t even have ‘accurate knowledge of his age’, as he stated in his 1845 autobiography “*Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*”: “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it”. However at the age of twelve he managed to learn the alphabet, which was the greatest event of his life. Later in 1838, he escaped from the slavery in Philadelphia and became the abolitionist writer and orator and led the abolitionist movement in Massachusetts. Douglass became well known for his speeches, which also included his explanations of how it is possible to become free. One of his famous lectures include “*Self-Made Men*”, which was first delivered in 1859, Frederick Douglass gives his own definition of the self-made man and explains what he thinks are the means to become free which indicates to the notion of freedom as the condition of one’s own making.² Alongside his orations Douglass also became famous as an iconic figure as

someone was photographed very often. Douglass was nearly the only American who was photographed so many times. The second person was Abraham Lincoln. Between 1841 and 1895 Frederick Douglass sat for about 160 photographs. He viewed photography as a “democratic art” and praised its ability to bring the power of image-making and self-representation to a greater public.

Isaac Julien’s piece *Lessons of the hour* consists of the ten-screen film based on photographs of Fredrick Douglass and his orations. This piece is a re-enactment of the life, which is fixed in photographs and speeches, later published and made accessible to the public also in the written form. The clear message of Julien’s work is his combination of these genres in a careful reading, which provides understanding of the probability of freedom as a possible stage in every person’s life. Ideally texts, images, speeches as forms of expression are available to every citizen, but the question arises here is the question of the access to them. It was also true for Douglass, but in the re-enactment by Isaac Julien this question of the access is problematized again.

The film is based on photographs which are documents of the diverse representation of blackness as opposed to a racist imagination of the time which for black people was the denial of access. The film revolves around the combinations of quotes from speeches given by Douglass in different times and narrates his life in this multi-screen ‘poetic documentary’. The multiple split-screens already refer to the fragmented nature of life, which cannot be linear and full of expectation. But it takes to know this fact and to act accordingly. Human life is a montage, a fictional adventure and down to the condition of one’s making. Freedom, in this sense, is the condition of one’s own making, a complicated task which involves connecting together intelligibility with sensibility in order to overcome the restricting nature of life itself and to discover ‘the means other than life’ through difficult activities.³ In other

words, it is possible to invent one's own technique, technics of becoming at the very point of impossibility of becoming. It takes to realise that the human is essentially non-essential, there is no essence or quality to lose, but one is obtaining any form of freedom by re-inventing what is absent. What is absent is the *quality*, which is missing.

Another important message here is the liberating nature of photography, the technological element, which in this particular case overcomes the racist imagination. It is both the mimetic and pharmacological at the same time: mimetic in a sense of Douglass's acting out of his freedom fixed in these photographs, pharmacological in Plato's sense, because the role technology plays is always double edged: as a *pharmakon* and *pharmakos*, as a poison and remedy.⁴ Photography as memory is remembrance and oblivion at the same time. The demonstration of the arrest of Assange by BBC news is a poisonous effect of the image whereas the case of Douglass in his understanding of photography is the remedy. An interesting thing is the *difference* which history imposes upon its subjects; the early use of photography which liberates Douglass and the new way of using images to demonstrate the arrest of Assange which marks the end of a particular form of democracy. Liberation takes place 'intermittently' because time itself is non-linear and modernity's consciousness is 'a double consciousness'.⁵ The fiction of exclusion created through the definition by the established theories of contemporary art, which is a part and parcel of the culture industry, is challenged by the non-linear reading, which is the 'lesson of the hour' to tell us another story.

The technology of photography in Isaac Julien's work is interpreted as a form of emancipation while taking us back to the 19th century. This is the story of the slave who escaped from the ship and managed to emancipate himself from being a slave. This escape, this act of freedom is the end of Douglass's slavery and the beginning of an impressive shift in his life towards the liberation of

other people. He managed to understand the role of the culturally novel means of expression, which is photography, the new invention of his time combined with the ancient art of the oration. While possessing nothing materially as a slave he gained an access to the immaterial culture of his time which helped to increase his own potential as an abolitionist. But this abolitionist attitude already started with his learning the alphabet in the early age, the technique of expression by writing, which directed his way towards freedom.

In Julien's film Douglass's photographs combined with his speeches show how the technology adopts the human imagination and 'giving the voice' to photographs is the act of freedom. The engagement with the technology of photography is the reproduction of the form of freedom and challenging the hierarchy by providing the model for equality. This takes place partially and includes "a part of those who are not part of".⁶ In this sense photographs of Douglass re-constructed in Isaac Julien's work effectively strengthens them as an artwork 'mechanically reproducing' the moment of freedom. The question arises here: who owns this technology and who is denied access to its reproduction? The notion of the 'reproduction' refers to the partiality of such an experience itself pointing to knowing how to free oneself. Our freedom may be found elsewhere in the world of technology and its use such as photography and its reproduction: only if one realises this possibility. Julien very carefully and masterfully collected together quotes from different orations by Douglass to demonstrate the power of the image and the subjectivity and how the awareness of both images and subjectivity may lead to liberation. In one quote from 1861 "*Lecture on Pictures*" Douglass stresses the 'mighty power of photography' and its ability to make "the subjective nature objective". Douglass stressed the possibility of reclaiming the subjective potentials of technology of photography in order to resist the racist imagination of his time. He viewed photography as a "democratic art" and stressed its ability to bring the power of image-making and

self-representation to a public. He recognized that new photographic technologies made it possible for a larger public to enjoy images in their own homes, and allowed us to project, to the world, the self as we wished to be seen. Just as modes of travel and transport gave the Western subject freedom to be mobile—and thus further solidified their subjectivity—so too had the mobility of images and “the facilities for travel has sent the world abroad, and the ease and cheapness with which we get our pictures has brought us all within range of the Daguerreian apparatus.”⁷

On the philosophical level Isaac Julien’s message here is his critically reclaiming the power of images, which kept certain subjects under strict control while having the power over images. Images, of course, cannot free people, but the awareness of the power of the image can. This is a very important message from the artist which points to the necessity of re-addressing the history of art itself by re-writing it according to images and words. In order ‘to give a voice’ to images while ‘re-writing history’ Julien is addressing the question of the orality, much debated question in the Western metaphysics starting from Plato to Derrida and Stiegler and in the work of cultural theorists such as McLuhan and Walter J Ong, to name but two.⁸ The main argument in these both tendencies is an explanation of the *lost memory*, which is the cause of exclusions and therefore the human being doomed to the bondage at the point of separation between the speech and writing. Socrates’ famous sentiment ‘writing destroyed speech’ passed to us by Plato explaining the way this destruction took place by separating speech from writing. What was ‘destroyed’ is memory, which was retained in speech. This destruction has also become the condition of the further retention of memory in writing. This pharmacological effect produces also the possibility of reproduction of memory or to put it in Derrida’s work, it is the condition of deconstruction: any writing is an elaboration of the speech followed by its depiction in images.⁹ Orality is the first organised

systemic space, which opened-up the space for the existence of memory. It is a form of ‘reality’; an audible dimension of ‘the real’.¹⁰

As soon as he became free from the slavery Frederick Douglass engaged in these two forms, oration and images and himself playing the negotiator in between these two excluded forms by elaborating what is excluded from his own experience. And because of this he didn’t just free himself, but became engaged in the collective consciousness, memory of which proved to be poisonous as in slavery and remedy of which has been reconstructed in his speeches. It is also important to note here, that it is made possible not as an act of the real, but as a non-real, a boundless “history”, which is enormously stored in the fictional memory of humanity and this memory is, of course, the history of art. In this sense and understood from this angle, the ‘history’ is not the referent point of memory any longer, but the subject to ‘encoding/decoding’, to the event of ‘figuring out’, as it has been powerfully put by Stuart Hall.¹¹

Isaac Julien’s approach deliberately mixes the factuality with the fictional element and narrates the story as the contamination of fact and fiction. This contamination, which is so resentfully entered into the space of photography, is the challenge made by art in capturing the partial revival of freedom in subjectivity, which became objective. The absence made it present, albeit partially. So freedom is possible only partially and this part is knowledge of knowing how to become free. This knowledge is a necessary condition of life. It is possible to say that every single person unconsciously experiences freedom without knowing it. Freedom is articulated in knowing and having knowledge of this experience. In his ‘Freedom essay’ Schelling expresses it as the following: “...understanding is actually the will in a willing. Nevertheless it is a will of the understanding, namely the longing and desire thereof; not a conscious but a prescient will, which’s prescient is understanding”.¹² Knowing how to obtain freedom emerges from not-knowing how to be free but willing to know.

In Isaac Julien's project Douglas Fredrick is shown in his discovery of the technique of becoming a master from being a slave. Taking place in the 19th century, the century of the rise of Hegelian 'master-slave' philosophy leading to Marx, Fredrick Douglas was 'acting out', to use Bernard Stiegler's phrase, the freedom as an escape from slavery literally by escaping from the ship while obtaining a partial freedom in 'acting out'.¹³

In this 'acting out' a partial way of liberation based on the 'know-how' of the act of freedom is also seizing control over the condition of one's own making. 'To seize control over the condition of one's own making' means to resist the control imposed by the power of the image upon any subject automatically. In order to escape this control one needs to seize control over his/her own condition of making images. Taking the self-control of how one becomes free is realising that there is no origin of freedom, it is 'without origins', for 'freedom' is an external affair recorded in memory of humanity and it's careful reproduction is the way towards freedom.

December, 2019

London

Notes:

¹ It is an allusion to Raymond Williams' notion of the culture as a long revolution. This revolution as a process brings into the prominence three forms of freedom: dominant, emergence and residual. See: Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Parthian Books, 2011

² For the online version of this speech by Frederick Douglass see:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130627064127/http://le-self-made-man.fr/linspirante-vie-de-benjamin-franklin/>

³ ‘Living a life by means other than life’ is an allusion to Bernard Stiegler’s famous argument about technics as other means than life which exists as the prosthesis to the life. See: Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimethues*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1994, p.29

⁴ Plato’s notion of “pharmacy” understood in Stiegler’s sense of the ‘pharmacological effect’. See: Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimethues*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1994, p.134

⁵ For the powerful treatment of non-linearity of time see: Giles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Continuum, 2004. The term ‘modernity as ‘double consciousness’ was coined by Walter du Bois See: Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York, Avenel, NJ: Gramercy Books; 1994. Both books challenge modernity’s belief in perfection.

⁶ Jacques Ranciere, *The Distribution of the Sensible: Aesthetics and Politics*, Continuum, 2006

⁷ Fredrick Douglass quoted in Isaac Julien’s film “*Lessons of the Hour*”(2019), premiered in Metro Pictures, New York (2019)

⁸ Jacques Derrida, Plato’s Pharmacy, in Peggy Kamuf (ed.) *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Columbia University Press, 1991 p.112 and Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen, London and New York, 1986

⁹ Jacques Derrida, The Double Session, in in Peggy Kamuf (ed.) *A Derrida Reader; Between the Blinds*, Columbia University Press, 1991 p.172

¹⁰ Despite McLuhan’s argument about the television replacing radio, oration continues not only as a form of resistance but also as a dominant form in the work of media presenters.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, Encoding/Decoding in the Television Discourse, in Douglas Keller et all (eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2009, p. 171-74.

¹² F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, Open Court Classics, La Salle, Illinois, 1989, 34

¹³ It is an allusion to Bernard Stiegler’s notion of ‘acting out’. See: Bernard Stiegler: *Acting out*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2008