



WRITING
ARCHITECTURES

Ficto-Critical Approaches

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BLOOMSBURY

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Door Left Ajar: On Dissident Waiting and Collective Fiction^{*}

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If waiting absorbs the person who waits, stories in turn absorb waiting, making the person emerge from his temporary absence in the enchantment of waiting to take his place in his story and thus in memory and expectation.

HAROLD SCHWEIZER¹

The waiting room

It's two in the afternoon. You try to make a piece of music in your head with all the ticking things, rhythms and beats in this waiting room. The marriage didn't work out after all. You pretended to be happy for way too long. The air-conditioning unit rattles and leaks into a bucket; its dripping fills the room with yet another rhythm. You notice some familiar faces that you have encountered during the last few days, hollow gazes, dozing bodies, sunk in thoughts or in intense soliloquy. The chairs and armchairs are faux brown leather, arranged around the hall. The four white doors open and close irregularly. Their handles are a golden coloured steel. A clock ticks on the wall. The aluminium-sliding window opens to a backyard, onto which another building also looks. You feel something humorous in this *Marriage & Divorce Office*, and a drop of sweat rolling down your back tickles you further. You don't want to take up that newspaper on the glass table in the middle of the waiting room. But you read the headlines from afar while looking at the photo of an orange city: *The Orange City Warns Us To Stay*

At Home Today. ‘Oxygen is orange,’ you think. It’s weird that you should wait all day long for an institution to recognise your falling-out-of-love. You hear the thump of stamps from next door. You make up a game for yourself, guessing which of the stamps are for falling in and which are for falling out of love. You randomly appoint a hesitation to the falling out. And you count: 74, 75, 76 . . . , 82, . . . The stamp beats blend with the ticking of the clock, the rattling of the air-conditioning unit, the sound of water running in the backyard. A symphony of (dys)function, of leaking, of failing. You crane your neck out of the window and look down to the backyard. A middle-aged man is washing a carpet. The carpet is flanked by a row of Victorian style armchairs that are arranged by the concrete wall on your left side. In front of the row of armchairs, there lays a row of plant pots, holding red geraniums. The man pushes a snow shovel across the surface of the carpet, which is covered with suds, and with each movement you get to see the blue and white flowers on its red background briefly revealed. The geraniums tremble by the splash of water. You sniff at the smell of the dust mixed with water, direct your attention back to the waiting room and continue your counting: 104, 105, 106.

* * *

When filled with imagination and passion, waiting becomes a mission; it becomes spatial, it creates a site, it produces a story. Harold Schweizer describes the time of waiting as ‘slow and thick’, it is that which ‘must suddenly be endured rather than traversed, felt rather than thought.’² When time becomes thick and viscous, it becomes difficult for one to move about, to act, to attain one’s agency. This viscous time ‘absorbs the person who waits’,³ and she disappears into that passive time of waiting. Without a story in which the person could reappear, it becomes difficult to imagine an alternative for what the waiting could deliver or how the time could be experienced. But when a story emerges in the time of waiting, it makes the waiting fast and thin; waiting becomes active; paradoxically bearable and unbearable. The one who actively waits both longs for it to come to an end, and inhabits its every second. The one who waits transforms into a maker, a dreamer, who attains agency over time by inhabiting the time of waiting, and by constructing the performing ground for the act of waiting. Active waiting transforms passively spent time into a story that, in Schweizer’s words, ‘absorbs waiting’.⁴ The one who actively waits becomes the performer in the story of waiting. The story of waiting in this text is told by dissidents who wait in various situations. Although sometimes individually, sometimes with others, they always wait together in an invisible network of connection; *collectively*, they write a *fiction* while they *wait*.

The story of waiting here takes place in a city suffocating in dirt and crime, in cruelty and mercy. Cars rush along the highways. Taxis hoot around the crossroads. Passers-by slow down in the vicinity of street acrobats. Children pause by the mechanic shops. Beggars do their best to lay

a guilt trip on the well-dressed citizens. Policemen ignore petty crimes. Cats tear open rubbish bags. Stray dogs cool off in narrow canals. Pickpockets scream about their bad luck. Developers, shading their eyes with their hands, check the cranes moving across the sky. Cranes swing in circles over the city; their uncoiled joints send squeaks into the surrounding mountains. Crows measure their weight on leafless plane trees. Wind tosses the laundry to and fro, allowing rooftop love-making to slip out. The roof lies in silence under the bench legs, under the antennae supports. Wires criss-cross the sky from antenna supports to patios. Spiders soften the corners with their white webs. Thieves take a rest behind the chimneys, revolutionaries scream their slogans, cats give birth to kittens. From the roof of the house, the orange sky melts into dark blue, creating brown shades. A woman's moan of pleasure causes a crow to take flight. It shoots behind the moving laundry, the wires and the chimneys before disappearing into the orange sky. Later, the roof looks at the moon and stars in silence, swallowing the remaining raindrops into the hole that is covered with a stone. You remove the stone, and drop the folded paper into that tiny hole.

It disappears
 slowly
 in
 the
 vertical
 darkness
 of
 the hole

•

The punching sound of steps from the upper world shakes the drops of water hanging from the ceiling, waiting to drop. The one who waits underground is still waiting for the right moment to reappear on the ground. The life of the one who waits is divided into durations of waiting and durations of moving from one mode of waiting to another; from one place of waiting to another. But every single time the one who waits, waits and moves to another place of waiting, she becomes someone else, something else:

She goes out wearing red, comes in wearing yellow,
 goes out wearing yellow, comes back wearing wings,
 goes out with a pen, comes back with a hat,
 goes out with a moustache, comes back with a sack,
 goes out with a cat, comes back with a horse,
 goes out as a he, comes back as an it.

While this text concerns waiting understood as a device of control, it questions how such a mode of waiting can be turned into a ground for

imagination, where the duration of waiting becomes the ‘critical inhabitation’ of the event of waiting.⁵ Instead of tolerating the dullness of the time, how can every second of waiting be turned into an act, producing grounds for change? The restriction and control of waiting spaces and waiting behaviours by those in positions of power manifests the subversive potential in the act of waiting. Although this potential depends on situation and context, to some extent waiting always holds the potential to produce chance encounters, disruptive acts or chaotic events by opening a duration of simply being in a specific place where the imagination is triggered. In their essay ‘Waiting Places as Temporal Interstices and Agents of Change’, Mattias Kärrholm and Gunnar Sandin investigate different kinds of ‘waiting modes’ and the spaces associated with them.⁶ They describe ‘waiting situations’ as a form of ‘in between time-space’ and argue that they can be given a ‘transformative role’.⁷ While arguing that there is a level of contingency in any sort of waiting, they organise waiting into four modes: ‘settled’, ‘pre-settled’, ‘unsettled’, and ‘non-settled’ or ‘chaotic’. In the fourth mode of waiting – the non-settled or chaotic kind – they describe waiting as a time-space agency out of everyday life, where waiting is ‘part of an uncontrolled series of events without any pre-programmed or even spontaneous action in sight at all’. They suggest that the characteristic of this mode of waiting is the ‘abrupt shifts-of-context’ that can introduce ‘extra-ordinary events’.⁸

In relation to these types of waiting, I suggest the dissident mode of waiting, regardless of whether it is ‘settled’ or ‘chaotic’, does not strive for ‘extra-ordinary events’, but slowly and in silence, and deep in imagination and fiction, transforms the act of waiting into an act of dissent. Dissidence is ‘an implicit, slow, and minor mode of political struggle, taking shape not by making an appearance, but through low-key mechanisms and tools, methods and tactics’ that ‘circumvent an oppressive power structure.’⁹ It is a mode of political engagement that humiliates the oppressive power by living an oppositional life in the heart of its tyranny, and thereby challenging it on every micro-level. Such political action is a slow process that simultaneously combines thinking, imagining and acting. Its slowness involves moments of waiting, waiting for the right moment to act.

When the duration of waiting is not taken as an obedient act but as the one enriched by what David Bissell calls an awareness of ‘the relationality between activity and inactivity’¹⁰ that allows a space for imagination, it could be turned into an inhabitation of time, looking for potentials hidden in the elements of the context through which subversive activity could take shape. The ongoing tension between a controlled waiting and active waiting is where the dissidents construct their act of dissent. In a context where tyranny’s fictions structure the city spaces and citizens as obedient, dissident worlds emerge in queues, waiting rooms, bus-stops, doorways, crossroads, balconies, rooftops, and so forth, interrupting the consistency of control. While controlled waiting is visible, staged, and cautious, dissident waiting is radically lived and characterized by being underground. It is a waiting in the

wings of the theatre of political performances, waiting to appear on the stage. In these moments and spaces of waiting, dissidents safely perform their political acts and points of view by adopting fictional identities and roles: they turn every single moment of waiting into a project of change, into a fiction that imagines new political realities.

Slides that travel down beneath the visible world

Fiction and fictional worlds are home to dissidents; here is where they encounter the unknown others, the welcome and the unwelcome characters. While the world around the dissidents appears logical, cities where people work, highways where people drive, alleys where they walk, oceans they stand by, mountains they climb, forests they get lost in, houses they sleep, eat and live in, dissidents instead run along non-existent highways, climb disappearing ladders, swim in withdrawing oceans, and hide under shrinking trees. They construct slides that travel down beneath the visible world, into the world of fiction. In the world of fiction, dissidents can safely perform their political acts.

Criticality of dissident fiction

Fiction, as Amanda Boulter writes, enables 'creative and critical responses to the world'.¹¹ It allows one to become 'a stranger in [their] own streets', to see existing reality in new ways, creatively and critically.¹² Fiction writers tell stories, they 'plunge' readers into 'imaginary worlds', 'enthral them with invented lives, tantalise them with made-up events'.¹³ When dissidence as covert method of dissent is at work, fiction becomes an effective tool in the construction of the figure of the dissident. While fiction writers work through curiosity about ideas, experiment with creative possibilities developing a 'critically creative imagination' and enter 'a clash with the world' in Vladimir Nabokov's words, dissidents live their fiction through understanding the power relations, experimenting with the art of the impossible in an oppressed and impossible situation, and expand their imagination to find ways of manoeuvring within that situation.¹⁴ Dissidents are both the authors and the characters of their own fiction. They are both the reader and the writer of their fiction, moving in a complex fictional world written by many authors. They constantly become the strangers in their own streets, as the streets are written anew with the presence of every single dissident. For the dissidents, making fiction becomes the risky art of a political life; the art of not being caught while challenging an oppressive power structure.

In the words of Jacques Rancière, fiction acts to 'visualize an encounter of incompatibilities'.¹⁵ In opposition to the false understanding of fiction vs

reality, he explains that the configurations of what is presented as real are in fact 'a matter of construction, a matter of fiction', and what is imposed on us as 'real' is in fact the constructed fiction of the police order i.e. the established political relations through which a certain power hierarchy and its oppressive mechanism can work in favour of sustaining itself. He puts forth fiction as 'the reframing of the "real", or the framing of dissensus'.¹⁶ Following Rancière's political understanding of fiction as an act of dissensus, fiction itself can be applied as a political project of challenging that 'police order', and dissenting from it.

Dissidence takes a fictional position in order to disrupt the fiction of the police order by living a fictional life – by making and playing fictional identities and roles. What is interesting in the discussion of fiction in relation to dissidence, is that the dissident and the tyranny both inhabit and act in the same spaces through fiction. This shared space of fiction is a complex one that Bonnie Nadzari's metaphor of 'a series of theaters within theaters', can expose its complexity. She describes the world in fiction as 'a series of theaters within theaters, where "truth" is hidden behind one, then another, and still another stage curtain'.¹⁷ In this way, it is in the spaces that the dissident and the tyranny inhabit and encounter, hide and reveal behind multiple curtains, that the character of dissident is constructed and where the criticality of fiction can come to work. Fiction becomes critical and political as it constantly involves an encounter with an oppressive power structure through a covert language.

In this series of theatres, the fiction constructed by dissidents is twofold. On one hand it protects them against the tyranny when they critically engage with the power structures; they can safely perform their political acts and views by adopting fictional characters while appearing and hiding behind many 'stage curtains'. On the other hand by playing such fictional characters, they create spaces, through which they can remain within the system instead of taking a critical distance. In the introduction to *Fiction as Method*, Jon K. Shaw and Theo Reeves-Everson refer to two strands of fiction as method: 'those that reveal structures and gain agency in the construction of the everyday, and those that are deployed as holes to let in the "future" or "abstract-outside"'.¹⁸ The dissident methods of fiction, works through both: while they understand and inhabit the fiction of police order and reveal possibilities to imagine the unimaginable through a covert language, they create cracks within the body of dominant power, and gradually make a change from within. In this sense, political application of fiction by dissidents, is a criticality from within. These holes or cracks are also spaces that invite other dissidents to inhabit and to participate in the construction of a *collective fiction*.

In line with this discussion of criticality from within in dissident fiction, spaces of waiting, is one of the potential spaces that because of the duration of being in a place and constructing a relation to its existing power relations, can become the space of critical fiction. When dissidents inhabit spaces of

waiting, the duration of waiting allows them to ‘reveal structures’ and ‘gain agency’. Spaces of waiting can themselves be transformed into those ‘holes’ in the dominant system, where other alternatives can leak in. Duration of waiting allows the dissidents to find each other, exchange their roles, and collectively build a critical fiction.

The lamp post: The anchor for a collective fiction

A shadow disappears in the act of turning off the lights. You don’t see if she is waiting in the dark or if she has already fallen asleep; if she has unlocked the door and left it ajar, or if she has locked it behind her and descended the stairs. The lamp post on the crossroad facing her window is the anchor of the story. While he waits on the edge of the spotlight on the tarmac sidewalk, leaning into the lamp post, the story evolves in all the following possible tracks. The woman behind the dark window, becomes many, moving through all of the different following story tracks simultaneously:

01

The cats run away through the bars by the squish of the metal door opening in darkness. The house is on the left side of the lamp post, where a silhouette drags a suitcase along and disappears around the corner. The story is still holding the one waiting under the lamp-post, but the silhouette with the luggage doesn’t know about the presence of a man waiting by the lamp post, and continues her long walk down the street, where she doesn’t wait for any unexpected encounter with a stranger.

02

She descends the stairs down to the ground floor, then pauses and opens a horizontal metal door and continues downwards on a ladder. Underground things seem colder, sharper, untouched. It is a world of sound, noises, voices, echoing along tunnels. On her arrival, into the darkness, she faintly sees the roots of the lamp posts hanging from the ceiling all in a row. She pauses by one, and hears a tapping sound, as if someone is waiting up there in the street, tapping their foot in impatience.

03

Behind the dark window, she waits to see what happens to the story, while the one waiting by the lamp post, takes out a folded paper, and slides it on its concrete rung. Then disappears into the darkness behind the spotlight. Uncertain of each other’s presence in the darkness, they continue waiting for the story to evolve.

03 + Oscillation = The queue

The one who waits balances her weight over her spine. She oscillates left and right, leaning on the left foot for two minutes and switching to the right foot for two minutes, trying to rest each leg for a moment. When she leans on the left foot, she sees an arm covered in a loose white sleeve with roses embroidered on its lower edge, hung freely beside a white dress. When she leans back on the right foot, she sees a restless hand flipping a piece of white cardboard continuously. When she leans on the left foot, she sees the profile of a person, lips moving, pronouncing inaudible words addressing someone across the street. When she leans back on the right foot, she sees a red plastic basket filled with three empty bottles. When she leans on the left foot, she sees a foot in a worn-down brown shoe, moving a pebble around carefully. When she leans back on the right foot, she sees half a face, facing the opposite direction of the queue, looking straight into her eyes. When she leans on the left foot, she sees the other half of the face, facing the opposite direction of the queue, looking straight into her eyes. When she leans back on the right foot, she sees the other half of the face, looking straight into her eyes. When she leans on the left foot, she sees again the other half of the face, looking straight into her eyes. And when she leans back on the right foot, she sees again the other half of the face, looking straight into her eyes.

Queue: A collective fiction

What dissident fiction brings to the discussion of critical fiction is the collective form of authorship i.e. writing with many authors, of whom not all are welcome. To discuss the importance of collective fiction in relation to dissident waiting, the queue is a paramount context of collective waiting, where people are connected in an invisible tunnel of control; a linear invisible architecture that curates the crowd in specific times and places. In his essay 'In-Queue Life', Abbas Kazemi situates the discussion of waiting in the Iranian context and investigates how the queue was applied as a mechanism of control in the post-revolutionary era of 1980s and during the war between Iran and Iraq.¹⁹ At the time, waiting in queues had become an inexorable part of life, essential for survival and for providing the basic necessities of life. The country was subjected to economic austerity and the government had to apply mechanisms for the fair distribution of the subsidised basic commodities. Because the war had broken out right after the 1979 Revolution and society was still dealing with post-revolutionary instability, the new regime needed to maintain pervasive control over various aspects of life. For people accustomed to being out in the streets during the Revolution, the queue was a good transient device in the hands of those in power; letting them remain out in the streets whilst controlling them in invisible tunnels.

Furthermore, the queue was not only limited to the time spent waiting in line, it also cast a pervasive shadow over life; it had become a ritual forming other aspects of life to the extent that one could call that era *in-queue life*, as Kazemi writes.²⁰ As a 'ritual', queuing had its own series of actions and orders and had both added new orders to everyday life and introduced its own material objects, spaces and organizations. It had influenced the urban environment and transformed the existing buildings and urban spaces into infrastructures for queuing. Sidewalks had become places for standing in queue; mosques had become centres for distributing coupons; big stores had been transformed into storage places.

The queue as Kazemi pictures it was extended from public spaces to domestic spaces. The small booklets of coupons handed to people had become important objects of survival that regulated a family's life. These were not only documents making people eligible for waiting in queue, but also tools for accessing people's personal information and keeping a record of their lives. To be able to survive, one had to be rendered visible by applying for these coupons. Furthermore, the special TV and radio programmes that announced the coupon numbers each night represented another time frame that made people wait – not in queues, but in their houses; one waited in the living room in preparation for waiting in queue.

The ritual of periodically queuing suspended underground life by dragging people to the surface, to specific places at specific times, and making them visible. Making people wait is to position them in a state of powerlessness; it is a way of annihilating the specificity of each individual.²¹ Kazemi argues that the queue kept people under surveillance, militarily organized, predictable, distracted and unified. It composed a façade of the social body, exposing its constituents, making individuals visible, locating them in a linear geometry not as a group, but as separate individuals who do not look at each other, but instead look toward what they are queuing for. The queue had created a different form of *togetherness* without being together, a 'distracted'²² group of people that substituted the revolutionary collective.

The queues, however, were the only possibility for public social gathering free from any dominant ideology or major political connotation at the time. Queuing time became a time when the dissidents could find each other and connect. In this unifying structure, one could paradoxically hide oneself, shift roles and perform differently under a mask of similarity imposed through the architecture of the queue. Queues had constructed a maze, a series of tunnels leading all over the city. As mazes, they entered into living rooms and appeared in public spaces again, flavoured by the underground's lively and messy lives, jokes, stories and various forms of dissent. From the midst of this rigid ritual, more chaotic gestures and disruptive tiny acts were sparked.

In two works of fiction, both entitled *The Queue* – one by Vladimir Sorokin and the other by Basma Abdel Aziz – the queue is used as a narrative

element of the story, and as a structure that makes spontaneous conversations happen between people. Abdel Aziz' novel, published in 2016, takes place in an unspecified Middle Eastern city, and the queue is formed behind a gate forever closed after what the writer calls, 'disgraceful events'.²³ The queue that never moves forward is a dystopian structure through which Abdel Aziz lets the characters remain in the narrative, connect to each other and unravel their stories. As Carmen Maria Machado writes in a review of the book, 'A whole community springs up around the queue: systems of barter and trade, gossip and deals.'²⁴ Sorokin, on the other hand, finds a liberating potential in the restrictive structure of the queue. The story, which takes place in the late Soviet 'years of stagnation',²⁵ depicts life through the narrations occurring in a queue; a queue in which no one knows what they are waiting for. The whole story unfolds through conversations, jokes, and curses exchanged between those waiting in queue. In Sorokin's comedy of the queue, the rigid linearity of the queue is disrupted, decomposed and deconstructed through the voice of people, their chatter, laughter and various plays on language.

While waiting in a queue, a foundation for a collective social life and chance encounters can be created. Beyond the mechanism of the queue working as invisible tunnels of control, what really connected people waiting in the queue was a shared story or stories they shared while waiting. Queues became 'an entrance into imaginative and experiential depth' in Peter Bishop's words,²⁶ yet not an individual imagination but a collective one. Through a collective imagination, stories are constructed among the dissidents and connect them together. Ariella Azoulay discusses such collective imagination as 'political imagination' and describes it as what 'exceeds the grasp of the individual mind' and 'a form of imagination that transcends the single individual alone and exists *between* individuals and is shared by them.'²⁷

Such collective aspect of imagination is inherent in the art of fiction; as Elif Shafak writes, fiction can work as 'a transcendental journey to other lives' and 'other possibilities'.²⁸ Dissident fiction specifically, is rooted in such collective imagination as its method is oscillation from one character to another, acting through masks of the others, sometimes pretending to be loyal to the tyranny, other times being oppositional. While waiting, dissidents imagine themselves being the other with whom they are waiting. These others are those toward whom the dissident reaches out, to connect with in order to enlarge the complex web of dissidence. At other times these others are the ones in power, the ones who oppress, the unwelcome ones. Such complex situations force dissidents to invent a language of 'writing with an unwelcome co-author';²⁹ a language that as Mohsin Hamid writes, can say publicly what might otherwise appear unsayable' and that can combat 'coerced silence that is a favored weapon of those who have power'.³⁰ While dissidents act in politically impossible situations, collective fiction becomes an effective tool to overcome such impossibility.

02 + The wires and pipes = The queue

Underworld. Wires hanging from the ceiling, thin and thick, of different colours, tied and twisted. Wires are the roots of infrastructures up above, on the ground. You pull one, and a bridge opens. You pull the other, a door to a kitchen on the fifth floor of an apartment flaps closed. You pull the yellow one that is bent over the floor, and the light on the lamp post across from the woman's window, turns off. You pull the red one and the trash bin by the queue is emptied. Those on the ground, who have never been underground, think that everything is controlled by the ones sitting somewhere on top of the towers. But dissidents know that things can be played with from underground, through a complex system of wires. If you pull the blue wire, someone might appear in the middle of the queue. The queue breaker. But others think that it is the queue that has dragged the person out of the underground.

01 + The door left ajar = . . .

The queue is a maze where at each moment, at each turn, your position changes. I arrived half an hour ago and there are, as far as I can see, five queues. He says he is the first in the queue, yet I thought he was the last. There are also some in the middle of the queue who think they are the first. And there are others just next to them who think they are the last. I never decided to wait in this queue, yet I ended up in this maze, while waiting by the lamp post. While waiting by the lamp post, I saw a shadow disappearing into the darkness of the window. And I never understood if he was waiting in the darkness, or if he fell asleep. Now I am stuck in this queue that is going up the stairs, onto the landing and through an open wooden door to the waiting hall. Leaning on my left foot, I only see half a face, looking straight into my eyes. Leaning on my right foot, I only see half a face, looking straight into my eyes. Leaning on my right foot I see a person descending the stairs, counting to a far thump of a stamp coming from the waiting hall: 189, 190, 191. . . . When I lean back on my left foot, I see half a face looking straight into my eyes while moving her lips: 198, 199, 200. . . . And all I think is: Has he left the door ajar?

Notes

* This text is a re-worked version of parts of my PhD thesis, *Interruption: Writing a Dissident Architecture*, presented at KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, in April 2018. The thesis can be found at this address: <http://kth.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1191313&dsid=2450>.

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