

Remaking the Body Politic Anew through Mob and Gang

King Mob Echo and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker (1968-1970)

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Abstract The aim is to analyse how the British, radical avant-garde collective King Mob (KM) and the American Up Against the Wall Motherfucker (UAWMF) developed an idea of the body rooted in the Gothic and Romantic imagery of the monster and the mob that emphasised the revolutionary potential of ugliness. The body bridged aesthetics and politics, co-extensive with organisational principles that confronted society at large. On the one hand, KM viewed the ugliness of the mob as a physical force whose imagery was strong enough to destabilise the State, while on the other, UAWMF understood the hostility of society towards the body of the hippie as the locus point of a new identity and discourse for it.

Keywords Gothic. Avant-garde. Neo-avant-garde. 1960s radicalism. Aesthetics and politics. Revolutionary avant-garde.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Unnatural Ugliness: King Mob. – 3 Natural Ugliness: Up Against the Wall Motherfucker. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

In the 1960s, various radical avant-gardes emerged across the Western hemisphere, bringing to bear new critiques of social relations that rejected Cold War polarization and engaged in the creation of bridges between aesthetics and politics that did not depend on the modernism/socialist realism divide. Taking many elements from past avant-gardes such as Surrealism, Dada, and even Futurism, collectives such as King Mob (henceforth KM), from the UK (based in London), and Up Against the Wall Motherfucker (henceforth UAWMF), from the US (based in New York), configured new approaches to the question of art's relation to the political.

These groups organized around revolutionary ideals and critical perspectives that identified capitalism as the one true enemy, utilizing the format of the periodical to press their projects into the social arena with the aim to instill libertarian perspectives in the population at large. While KM published its own magazine, appropriating the image of low-cost journals such as *Daily Echo*,¹ UAWMF also produced images and articles for underground magazines, primarily *Rat Subterranean News*. The objective was to reach as many people as possible, considering their financial reach was limited, and their productions constantly outline

¹ Wise 2003.



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the communal and collective nature of their anti-capitalism.

Within a heterogeneous theoretical framework that echoes those of previous vanguards, and which includes figures like Karl Marx, André Breton, Norman Brown, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Richard Huelsenbeck, and Sigmund Freud, among others, both KM and UAWMF developed an aesthetics of the body that grew from the political question of what their collectivity should look like if it was to take on the task of destroying capitalism. The answer, for both, lay in Gothic (and Romantic) imagery that equated difference with ugliness; like the Romantics, to the bourgeois modernity of rationalized (and thus beautiful) society these groups opposed the modernity beneath, to be found in the formlessness of the 'underground', the sewage, the unconscious, and the sublime.

However, while parting from the same Gothic point of view, these two collectives lead into different directions when it came to portray the bodies of their revolutionary community. KM delved much more specifically into English Romanticism to articulate its concepts, coming to find in the figure of the mob a totality strong enough to attack the foundations of the State. Its totality, nevertheless, is amorphous, in the sense that it is not unified but made up of sheer difference, a multiplicity of formlessness that represents an embodied threat to the pretended symmetry and clarity of liberal, ideally rational social order. By its part, UAWMF developed its concepts around a notion of belonging rooted in ideas of tribalism, which it applied to the organization of its collectivity as a gang.

Where KM was completely open-ended and required no affiliation, UAWMF demanded from its members an identity alignment that was based upon the image of the 'freak' or the 'hippie', exploiting the antipathy and discrimination of US society towards it in order to coalesce into a collectivity of an alterity born already in opposition to a 'straight' social order. In other words, they treat their self-image as that of the monster, instrumentalizing it not only for identification and association with other American monsters (for example, the Black Panthers) but also to enact the idea of a society quite distinct from that in existence. A member of UAWMF thus becomes a 'motherfucker', an unrepresentable being before decent society.

Beyond the comparative framework presented here through the ideas of the Gothic, the monster, and the body politic, these two groups were chosen in tandem because they were directly connected. Members of KM had contacted members of UAW-

MF as early as 1967 through the network of the radical, revolutionary avant-garde from France called Situationist International (SI), to which various artists from KM had once belonged. At that time, they were part of the English Section of the SI, and the organization's attempt to establish cells across the world led the soon-to-be members of KM to grow the network in the US by connecting with Black Mask in New York, which would transform into UAWMF in 1968. Both groups kept in contact, beyond the SI's network, until their dissolution.

In terms of the current discussions of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, this article takes a historical (and historicist) route that attempts to outline the discourse of these particular groups; it is fruitful to see their products and actions as discursive elements inasmuch as they are grounded upon the avant-garde attempt to bridge what they conceived of as a separation between art and life. Since the nineteenth century, the aforementioned relationship has been explored by artists themselves, from Richard Wagner's theoretical suggestion of a wholesomely aesthetic community (the 'artwork of the future') to the practical engagements of twentieth-century vanguardists with various political currents. Of the latter, perhaps the clearest examples are the Futurist links with fascism as well as those between Surrealism and communism.

Politically-minded academics and intellectuals across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries - particularly those within Marxist and adjacent traditions - have approached this relationship through an equally modernist lens, from Walter Benjamin's notion of the author as producer to Jacques Rancière's conception of a continuity between the aesthetic and the political. This essay works within that frame in which artistic practices inform and are informed by academic developments on the shared question of how to view the aesthetics/politics connection, standing uneasily on the verge of the concerns of both art history and political theory. The aim is to exemplify how that relationship is worked out and configured by these two groups as discourses that do not differentiate between the artistic and the political.

This essay will thus attempt to draw a panorama of the ideas and images with which these avant-gardes articulated the *ugliness* of their respective political bodies, first through KM's mob and then through UAWMF's Motherfucker. The metaphor that links state and body can be traced back to Greek political philosophy,² but it is Thom-

2 Musolff 2010, 81.

as Hobbes' version what best informs modern(ist) conceptions of it, deeming it as a human-made 'artificial man' of mechanical nature that functionally resembles the God-made 'natural body'.³ The figure of the Leviathan articulated various similes of bodily functions to the degree of also having, for example, ailments and diseases, which would later serve as the philosophical platform that would allow for concepts such as that of 'public health' during the French Revolution. Even in its towering proportions, however, Hobbes' body politic did not refer to monstrosity, and was seen, even by critics like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as a harmonious organism with a life cycle comparable to any natural body.⁴

The aesthetic dimension of this understanding, while not immediate, is made concrete in the

equally ancient links between nature and beauty, which became of central relevance in the discussions of art throughout the Enlightenment and afterwards, when a "transformation of medicine into an aesthetic of health"⁵ took place. The conjunction of "the key terms 'art', 'health', and 'beauty' through an assertion of the primacy of the 'natural' body"⁶ thus emerged in the nineteenth century, coming to overlap with the Romantic imagery of the body (politic) as an organism constituted by interrelated, natural parts: figures such as the 'body of the nation' and the 'people' come to perform the (racial, patriarchal) intersection of the 'aesthetic of health' as organic homogeneity. It is at this juncture where KM and UAWMF act, offering distinct versions of the political body marked by heterogeneity, as will be seen below.

2 Unnatural Ugliness: King Mob

In June 15, 1968, KM issued a call for the general public to join in a planned action that would take place at a Notting Hill closed garden called Powis Square. The garden, which could only be accessed by a few wealthy proprietors in the area, was forcefully opened by the group on a Saturday afternoon, letting everyone who was passing by in with the purpose of letting them play freely inside. The group hired gorilla and horse suits for the task, suggesting a carnival of libertarian activity that would aid expropriate, in a very limited sense, what in their view should have worked as a public park.

According to their own account, standers-by joined them in tearing down the fences, and when the police arrived it started to arrest suspects of the crime, among them the members of the collective in animal suits. The local government, which had previously denied the possibility of letting the space be used by the community at large⁷ pursued and fined the criminals; however, some months later, the area was opened up to the public at last.⁸ The leaflet that the group used that day to announce their action read as a Gothic roll-call of enemies of classical beauty, with a wide range of associations of class, age, and ability [fig. 1].

Reproducing a darkened and reduced version of Eugène Delacroix's 1828 lithograph entitled *Mephistopheles Flying Over the City* [fig. 2], with its titular entity twisted in position and bearer of proportions that rupture the rules of classicism, the leaflet calls for a 'DEVILS PARTY' in 'Notting HELL'. The opening of Powis Square is identified with figures that are connected through the notion of social rejection, mixing referents such as 'THE WORKERS' with 'THE WITCHES' and 'THE DEMONS' with 'THE OLD'. This diversity of identities operates as a Gothic line behind which a community of ugliness is articulated and rhetorically constituted. The 'DEVILS PARTY' acquires in this context another meaning parallel to that of carnival: a political organization in which all the perceived threats and ghosts of society come together to overwhelm the walls of civilization, symbolically acted out in the tearing down of Powis Square's fences.

The heterogeneity of this party is significant, inasmuch as it freely associates social positions and fantastic identities as part of the same process of rejection and opposition of identities made invisible by the social order, belonging, in a way, to its repressed. This is related to how I will use the

3 Musolff 2010, 108.

4 Musolff 2010, 117.

5 Sarafianos 2005, 77.

6 Montague 1994, 92.

7 Argente 2007, 151.

8 Vague 2008.



Figure 1 King Mob, *Powis (Wenceslas) Sq* flyer. 1968. Reproduced in Tom Vague (ed.), *King Mob Echo*. London, Dark Star, 2000

Figure 2 Eugène Delacroix, *Mephistopheles Flies Over the City*, from the 1828 edition of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public domain



term 'Gothic' throughout this essay, not as a genre but as a conceptual framework that includes its original eighteenth-century meanings of barbarity, supernaturalism, and medievalism,⁹ and which expanded throughout the next centuries as a discursive apparatus meant to signal the instability of (social) narratives and their ultimate lack of self-sufficiency. These ruptures develop through elements such as historical hauntings and psychoanalytic terms of unconsciousness and the ruptures in which the unconscious emerges to overrule the order of consciousness.¹⁰

Heterogeneity marks the history of the Gothic itself, in the sense that it presents a "resistance to canonization"¹¹ and demonstrates that "there is no sure foundation" for any kind of narrative¹² because Gothic aesthetics constitute a labyrinth of "texts which they are not, texts which are ceaselessly invoked while no less ceaselessly misread".¹³ By undermining the autonomy of texts, by invoking the phantasms of other documents and the insufficiency of their authority at large, the Gothic thus understood allows for a position that rejects

not only the claims to such an authority but also the claim to the organic homogeneity at the core of the concept of 'art work'. By making manifest the "passions, desires, and excitements [...] suppressed"¹⁴ by social order, it suggests the rupture of such a homogeneity as it presents avenues of interpretation and experience that are subterranean to its intended, explicit form.

Taken to the extreme, it is possible to see the Gothic as the impossibility of homogeneity, constantly haunted by differences that are non-existent in principle, having been rationalized away, but that nevertheless linger in the shadows of the unsaid, in that which is hidden by choice of words, in the unconscious. As will be explored further on, this is how KM approaches the Gothic, and with it, the ugliness of its body politic.

The collective explicitly approached British Romanticism as a source, and with it, the context that produced it. The name itself refers to the Gordon riots of 1781, which, regardless of historical accuracy, KM positively viewed as an event in which "a huge swathe of [London's] destitute population

9 Botting 2012, 13-14.
10 Punter 2012, 4.
11 Punter 2012, 2.
12 Punter 2012, 3.
13 Punter 2012, 3.
14 Botting 2012, 19.

was swept up in an orgy of looting, burning, and bitter revenge.”¹⁵

Ian Haywood, writing about the representation of violence and social movements of the late Enlightenment, has argued that the Gordon riots could be seen as the origin of what he terms the “spectacular mob”¹⁶ as a “new force in British cultural history”.¹⁷ At the time, Haywood recounts,

The *Annual Register* called the night of 7 June [1781] a time of ‘infernal humanity... one of the most dreadful spectacles this country ever beheld... everything served to impress the mind with ideas of universal anarchy and approaching desolation’. Dr Johnson spoke of a ‘time of terror’, and William Cowper described a ‘Metropolis in flames, and a nation in ruins’. Nathaniel Wraxall saw a resemblance between the Gordon riots and the Peasants’ Revolt, comparing Gordon to ‘Wat Tyler and Jack Cade, the incendiaries of the Plantagenet era’. The mob’s contempt for genteel property implied a degree of class-consciousness. [...] The City of London authorities were initially slow to intervene, but a force of 10,000 troops was eventually brought into the capital to restore order. Their impact was lethal [...] The destructiveness of the riots was unprecedented.¹⁸

Thus, the “spectacular mob” is a dramatically public, even sensationalist, representation of the coming together, in this case, of an angry underclass. In the image articulated by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century press, the mob “is led by mock-leaders, by criminals and impostors, women, agitators of ‘the lowest order’ that cowardly scatter before the ‘natural strength of established society’ is ‘aroused and directed’”.¹⁹

Yet another social movement informed this image, often directly associated, in fact, with the popularity of the Gothic novel: The French Revolution. Reviewers of 1790s Gothic novels were aghast at

their portrayals of horror and the ruin of the Old Regime: “by linking Burke’s terror with Robespierre’s in the limited case of romances by women writers, critics stripped the Gothic of its high literary pretensions, implicitly accusing its authors of being social incendiaries, while figuring them as literary sans-culottes: in other words, as a semiliterate mob.”²⁰ The parallel between British (women) authors and French revolutionaries was meant to raise the image of the mob as a monster out of control,²¹ irrational and led entirely by emotion into open-ended violence against society itself. KM fully intended to conjure up the ghost of the revolutionary mob, not only in its name but also in the political aesthetic it pushed in both its magazine and its actions, such as the opening of Powis Square.

The carnivalesque aspect of the Powis Square action was thus a reflection of King Mob’s “delight in the ‘bodily lower stratum’ and the unbridled, unrefined pleasures associated with supposedly vulgar lower classes.”²² During the 1968 occupation of the London School of Economics, the collective distributed leaflets and pamphlets that revealed in the ‘crudity’ of the body, with equally crude messages [fig. 3] that were meant purely to provoke,²³ openly and brazenly dealing with the repressed sexuality of 1960s British society in a progressive milieu. What was repressed of the “bodily lower stratum” had an analogical function in terms of society: the fear and the shame of the genitals, exposed in juvenile black humour by the LSE images, is the fear and the shame of what KM, redrawing Marxist terms, conceptualized as the *Lumpenproletariat*. According to a text written a year earlier (1967) by the members of KM, then a part of the wider organization of the Situationist International,²⁴ the

lumpen is the sphere of complete social breakdown of apathy, negativity and nihilism - but, at the same time, in so far as it defines itself by its refusal to work and its attempt to use its clan-

¹⁵ Wise 2003.

¹⁶ Haywood 2006, 181.

¹⁷ Haywood 2006, 184.

¹⁸ Haywood 2006, 185.

¹⁹ Haywood 2006, 188.

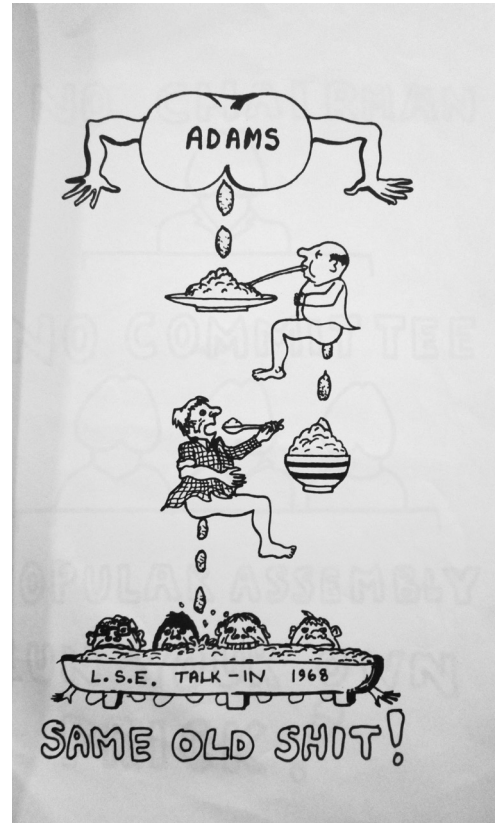
²⁰ Miles 2002, 44.

²¹ Miles 2002, 55.

²² Cooper 2017, 121.

²³ Wise 2003.

²⁴ The SI was an avant-garde collective created in 1957 by artists who shared a contextual link to Surrealism in one way or another. Its revolutionary positions were best exemplified by its participation in the 1968 student movements in Paris, and its internationalism by the formation of ‘Sections’ in various European countries as well as the US. It was disbanded in 1972, after most of its founding artists and participants had resigned or been expelled from the organization.



Figures 3a-b King Mob, LSE Occupation Flyers. 1968. Tamiment & Wagner Archive, New York

destine leisure in the invention of new types of free activity, [the lumpen] is fumbling, however clumsily, with the quick of the revolutionary supersession now possible.²⁵

KM's direct identification with the *Lumpenproletariat* and its attempts to awaken the revolutionary mob are accompanied by a series of associations with the 'lower' body of society and its inherent ugliness, best represented by the Gothic expanse of identities like those of the 'DEVILS PARTY'.

The emergence of this mob is aestheticized fully in the cover of the first issue of the group's magazine, published in April 1968 [fig. 4]. Underlined by a Marx quote that suggests a similar upwards movement, the image stands out as a ghastly apparition; it is a reproduction of a still from the 1913 silent film *Juve contre Fântomas*, corresponding to the final part of the film, in which the arch-villain Fântomas, whose main ability is to impersonate and transform into anyone, anywhere, escapes from the clutches of the law by hiding inside the

cistern of a villa. The villain's 'true form' is the faceless, black-clad person depicted in the still, an identity-less monster whose significations are forever in *escape*.

If the monster simultaneously captures an excess of meaning as well as a condensed version of social threats²⁶ (an empty signifier of society's *negative*), the image of Fântomas serves to affirm the appearance and emergence of a body that stands in obscure, complete opposition to social norms in which identity is a rationalized form of clarity, an idealization extended to society as such, for which the loss of individuality, the 'giving in' to irrationality and basic urges means the conformation of a formless, contingent mob. As such, it is the bearer of the repressed, suggested already in the first text of the magazine, an article by Norman O. Brown precisely called *The Return of the Repressed*. It suggests an alchemical metaphor in which the underground and the surface come to be related as distinct places of reason, in which the former produces monsters and

²⁵ Vague 2000, 68.

²⁶ Halberstam 1995, 3.



Figure 4 King Mob, *King Mob Echo* #1. 1968.
National Art Library, London

the latter machines; it promotes a “sewage-system” of communication against “technological rationality”, arguing for a fluidity between high and low in favor of the low, “so that wildness can come above ground”.²⁷

The text is accompanied by a photograph of a decomposing corpse, for which the caption reads: “the body of Rosa Luxemburg, dragged from a canal in March 1919, three weeks after her murder”. [fig. 5] This juxtaposition is infused with Gothic elements that suggest a haunting of historically unfulfilled promises – the repressed – that have found the right juncture at which to manifest: the formless opposite of society, its detritus of ugly bodies amassing in the *Lumpenproletariat* mob that comes ‘above ground’.

In 1969, for the third number of *King Mob Echo*, KM directly referenced UAWMF and their practice, with a pulp comic-book cover in which a werewolf exclaims: “A M-M-M MOTHERFUCKER IS A WEREWOLF!” [fig. 6]. Both groups had contact with each other through a series of incidents

that led to the expulsion of the English Section of the Situationist International and the formation of KM, and which is a topic for another essay. The whole third number of KM’s magazine is dedicated to UAWMF and their practices, finding a common ground in the Gothic modifications of the body. The horror of the sudden, futurist-line-laden appearance of the werewolf in the cover adds yet another layer to the “return of the repressed” as bodily transformation, in which monstrosity becomes visible aggression, the individual Other that mirrors the social Other that the mob represents.

If the rational clarity (and implicitly, beauty) of the singular, unified identity of the modern individual has a correspondence in the mechanical functions of capitalist society, then the split, fragmented identity of the Gothic individual has a correspondence in the emotional unpredictability of the mob, a body politic already inside society, waiting to return at any time with a revolutionary intent. As in the ‘DEVILS PARTY’, it is a monstrous body in which “difference [is] made flesh”,²⁸ except

²⁷ *King Mob Echo* #1 (1968). London, National Art Library: SZ 0064

²⁸ Cohen 1996, 7.



Figure 5 King Mob, *Insert from King Mob Echo #1*. 1968. National Art Library, London

Figure 6 King Mob, *King Mob Echo #3*. 1969. National Art Library, London

Figure 7 King Mob, *Insert from King Mob Echo #3*. 1969. National Art Library, London.

instead of being entirely defined by social apparatuses of representation, KM attempts to appropriate the negativity of that body politic monstrosity in order to emphasize and suggest a radical heterogeneity in opposition to the totality of capitalism, Romantically inverting the disdain for ugliness.

“We must develop our own standard of beauty [sic]”, reads one of the images of the magazine [fig. 7], which reproduces and alters Peter Paul Rubens’ *The Head of the Medusa* (1617-1618) (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). The decapitated head speaks in first person plural, throwing the viewer into a position where the Medusa is potentially perceived as part of ‘us’, the sublimity of the image suggesting that KM, like Percy Shelley, saw the mythical monster as the “victim of the tyranny and cowardice of established power.”²⁹ The vermin that surrounds the monster are re-signified by the phrase while maintaining their despicable status: that “beuty” (*sic*) parts from the difference embodied by them. After all,

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, ver-

min [...] had acquired a different significance. [...] Beggars and vagabonds were associated with their vermin [...], [which became] compelling images of the poor, who are characterized as hordes of “human insects” who threaten the prosperity and integrity of the nation.³⁰

The chaotic multiplicity of these animals in the painting is thus claimed by their relationship to the text and KM’s political stance in general as a form of community, a *Lumpenproletariat* coming-together that expands in erratic, potentially violent ways, their bodies not only a hazard to the integrity of society but split themselves, their animality (like that of the werewolf, but also like that of the gorilla and the horse in the Powis Square action) a dark, potentially uncontrollable wilderness. Not beauty, but “beuty” – a new political configuration that deviates and twists what is already there, contained in the ugliness of “beggars and vagabonds” united (but not unified) into a *mass* to rival and counter the mechanisms of the capitalist State.

3 Natural Ugliness: Up Against the Wall Motherfucker

UAWMF emerged from another radical avant-garde collective based in the Lower East Side of New York, called Black Mask, and which had brought together artists interested in directly impacting communities with an anti-capitalist intent. The group produced a single magazine in 1968 but contributed various images and texts to the newspaper *Rat Subterranean News* well into 1969. It took the name from the Amiri Baraka poem *Black People!*, of late 1967,³¹ utilizing the word ‘motherfucker’ to avoid any and all attention from the mainstream press, firmly fixing itself in the underground, as well as suggesting an unrepresentability worthy of monsters.

One of the founders of the group, Ben Morea, was crucial in the theoretical development of its aesthetics, which associated the resistant image of the Native American with ideas that arose from the social confrontations of hippies (or the

so-called ‘love generation’), as well as radicalized New Left youth that wanted to clash directly with the State. All these elements were articulated as a violent ‘tribalism’ infused with anarchist thought through which the group referred to itself as an ‘affinity group’. The affinity group was understood as an intuitive, *natural* coming-together of individual drives and desires that provided an horizontal platform from which to mount an assault upon capitalism and the State, in its association to the Native American a continuation of the avant-garde’s primitivist idealism.³²

The violence of the group’s rhetoric attempted to fuse the US counterculture’s emphasis on peace and love with revolutionary vitalism and activism: for UAWMF, “the counterculture was impotent. The flower enough was not enough; rather, flowers (and all they represented) had to be linked to Vietnamese freedom fighters and guer-

²⁹ McGann 1972.

³⁰ Raber 2013, 26.

³¹ Grindon 2015, 22. See also Fahs 2012, 38.

³² In it, the actual situation of the peoples whose images were appropriated and reconfigured by twentieth century avant-gardes is mostly ignored in favour of an idealization of their opposition to terms like ‘civilization’ and the ‘West’. Examples, from cubist collage to surrealist literature, abound. UAWMF’s use of an image of the Native American, erasing any and all differences within the category as well as obviating any challenges to it, is just one of those instances, late into the 1960s.

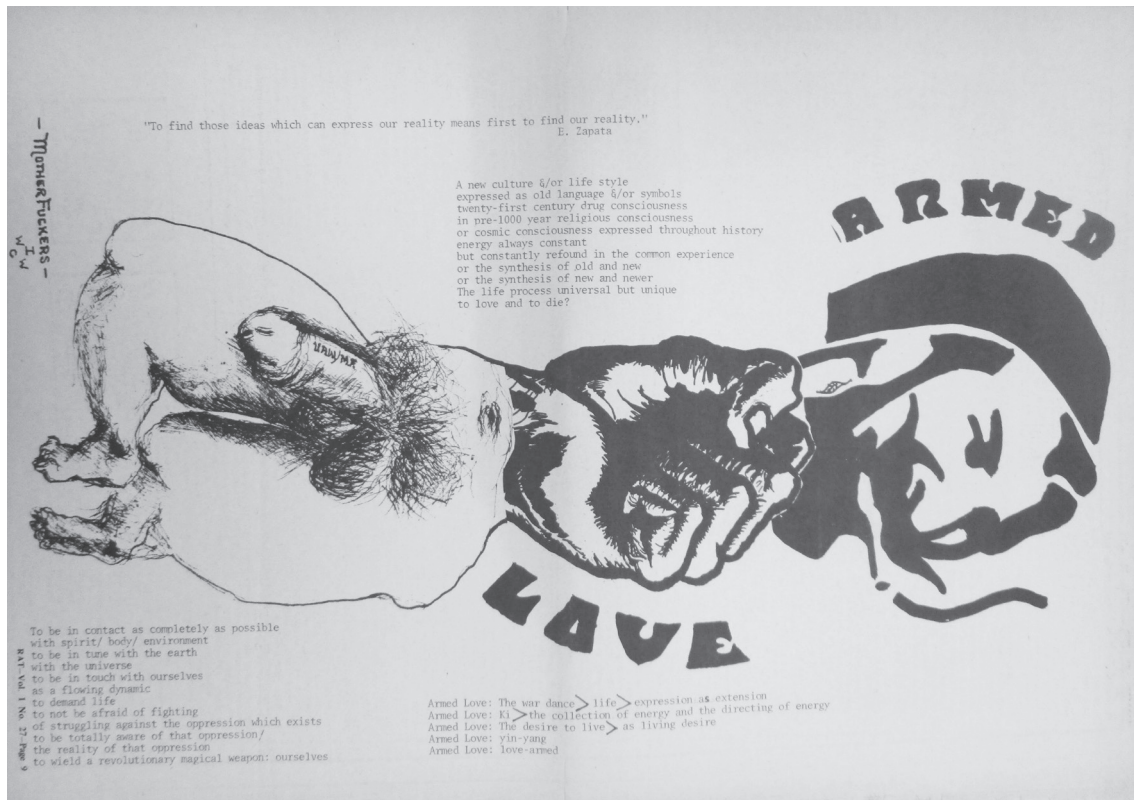


Figure 8 *Rat Subterranean News*, vol. 1, no. 27, January 31-February 6, 1969. Fales Archive, New York

rilla warfare.”³³ The social dynamics of the Lower East Side led them to form, in this sense, a gang of hippies with an emphasis on “violent confrontation and intransigent opposition to authority of any kind”,³⁴ whose motto was “armed love”, guided by a militant discipline: “our non-violent Love and the violent Defense of our community are the true expressions of nature and life - destroying what is old and rotten to make way for what is new... ARMED LOVE / LOVE ARMED!”³⁵

The virile - often misogynist - vanguardist exaggeration of this militancy and its expression in street combat parted from an appropriative inversion of meanings similar to that enacted by KM towards the mob as body politic, except applied to the body of the hippie, thus understood as a Motherfucker. To the idealistic frailty and peacefulness of the image of the hippie,³⁶ UAWMF offered a hy-

per-sexualized, hyper-masculine version of it that turned it into a monstrous collage that embraces ugliness [fig. 8]. This two-page spread in *Rat* enacts “armed love” as a grotesque body in which the revolutionary sign of the raised closed fist becomes the link between the magnified legs and penis and the head, an image appropriated from the Zig-Zag brand of cigarettes. The head is that of a Zouave,³⁷ a class of infantry created in the nineteenth century French army, mostly composed of Northern Africans; this pop image of a Berber or Algerian soldier, with a fez that indicated the ‘native’ origin of a colonial troop, portrays an exoticized manliness that comes to be compounded with the extremity of a masculinity in which the very organ of its sex is inscribed with the acronym “UAW/MF”.

The “synthesis of old and new”, hyper-sexualized in the identity of the Motherfucker as an Ori-

³³ Casey 2017, 175.

³⁴ Scott Brown 2013, 827.

³⁵ *Up Against the Wall Motherfucker* (1968). Tamiment & Robert Wagner Archive: TAM530, box 1, folder 62.

³⁶ Which often led to systematic victimization in the form of organized and spontaneous beatings, as described by contemporaries like Bruce Niceswanger (1969).

³⁷ See the Zig-Zag company website: <https://www.zigzag.com/story/> (2019-06-14).

entailed, powerful, and virile warrior, comes to represent the avant-garde drive of abolishing the art/life division as one that begins in the body of the (hippie) revolutionary. Understanding the collaged modernism of the Motherfucker himself³⁸ meant to reconceptualize this avant-garde's war against capitalism as one that is first and foremost waged interiorly, the result of which is the

Flowing dynamic
To demand life
To not be afraid of fighting
Of struggling against the oppression which exists
To be totally aware of that oppression/
The reality of that oppression
To wield a revolutionary magical weapon:
ourselves³⁹

The body, therefore, becomes weaponized masculinity born from an acquisition of consciousness of oppression, giving birth to the hippie revolutionary. Like the classical anarchistic associations of the affinity group with natural law, the baring of the revolutionary's essential organs (enormous penis, the power of the fist, the exotic features of the 'native soldier') comes to be an assault upon the here implicitly feminized 'decency' of 'straight' society, conceiving of it as the civilized walls to be torn down. The recurrent theme of the "life against death" dichotomy wielded by the group throughout its existence draws a generative conclusion from the violence to be enacted, in the sense that this hyper-masculine organism comes to be creative, active, having an artistic (and aesthetic) function oriented by the refashioning of the world, its plasticity manipulated not through the care of the traditional artist's hands, but through the rupture of the avant-gardist's fists.

Against the idealist realm of art and its representational analogue in the world of protest, UAWMF posits an aggressive sculpturing whose material is, simply put, society. KM, describing their US partners, put it thusly: "the only shock brusque enough to snap dissidents out of their trance and its dream syntax: a karate-trained Dadaist commando actually fighting in the gutter is enough

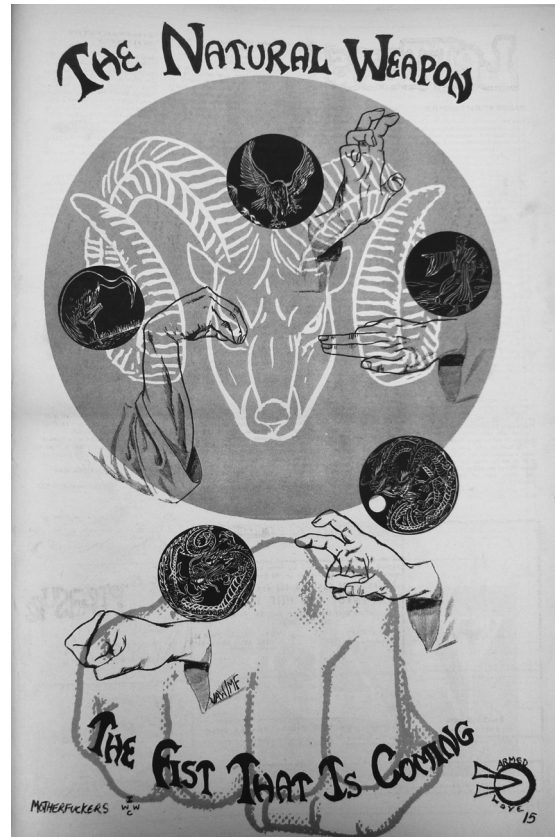


Figure 9 *Rat Subterranean News*, vol. 2, n/n, July 26-August 8, 1969. Tamiment & Wagner Archive, New York

to complete the demoralization of any intellectual [...]".⁴⁰ Every art was a martial art for UAWMF, every kick and punch the materialization of an aesthetic.

An enraged head of a ram and a series of Chinese symbols and close-ups to martial arts techniques are juxtaposed in an image entitled "THE NATURAL WEAPON - THE FIST THAT IS COMING", published in *Rat* [fig. 9]. Arranged like a constellation, the image suggests an astrological symbolism, where the ram (Aries), a fire sign, stands for aggression and creativity - "a wild symbol of the creative forces of nature".⁴¹ Every animal and fantastic creature (crane, owl, human, drag-

³⁸ The sexual politics of UAWMF tended, even with their textual emphasis on sexual liberation and the equality of women, towards misogynistic and homophobic practices. Members of the group have offered, both contemporarily and afterwards, critiques of this aspect of the organization in different instances. See Neumann 2008, 58; G.A.N., "Untitled Critique" (1969). New York, Tamiment & Robert Wagner Archive: TAM530, box 1, folder 57; and finally, Jonathan S to Max Blechman [letter], March 30, 1994. New York, Tamiment & Robert Wagner Archive: TAM530, box 3, folder 1.

³⁹ *Rat Subterranean News* (1969), vol. 1, no. 27, January 31-February 6. Fales Archive: AP2. R36.

⁴⁰ *King Mob Echo* #3 (1969). London, National Art Library: SZ 0064. These ideas have misogynist implications, as mentioned above: the revolutionary needs to be a *man*, regardless of sex.

⁴¹ Biedermann 1994, 279.



Figure 10 *Rat Subterranean News*,
vol. 2, n/n, May 2-8, 1969.
Fales Archive, New York

on) corresponds to a hand gesture that together compose a downward series that culminates in the front-facing picture of the fist at the bottom.

The essentialization of both natural and fantastic bodies into the forms that the hand takes for combat represents an overarching resolution of the identity split of the monster, its excess of meanings channeled into the violence of transforming the world; there is harmony, but it is only achieved in throwing oneself towards the body politic and smashing it into the desired form. The monstrosity of these images does not reside, as in KM, in the assumption of a Gothic character that rejects 'nature' as such, but in the proposition that it is, in fact, the monster that is truly natural.

This is what is depicted by another image pub-

lished in *Rat* by UAWMF [fig. 10]. It is a collage of *The Incredible Hulk* panels, speech globes, drawings, and word interventions, arranged in a psychedelic composition that begins with the Hulk struggling against some form of mind control (ideology) and proceeds downwards, culminating, like "THE NATURAL WEAPON", with the fist that clearly breaks through such constraints. The monster's body is fluid, porous with an energy that emphasizes the potential formlessness of its uneven proportions.

As in KM, there is a reversal here of the negative social status of the monster, an assumption of the identity that recognizes its formation in opposition to 'normality': "we will break free!", says one of the speech globes, for which another follows

with “even though they made us outcasts”. The expressive fluidity of the Hulk’s body, turned into a torrent of restorative violence, becomes more solid as the flow progresses, having an almost clear-cut shape by the end: But, the madder we Motherfuckers get – the stronger we motherfuckers become! Now we will show you what *power* really is!” says the Hulk as it readies a blow, and finally screams “-and it won’t fail me *now!*!”; the fist crushes through the page with the word ‘never’ above it functioning like a comic-book onomatopoeia of the act of breaking the wall.

Directly identified with the community of the Motherfuckers, the Hulk’s monstrosity, born of the same duality of rage and pain as that of other Gothic figures like Frankenstein’s creature, articulates the reversal of a social othering that finds positivity in revolutionary aesthetics, in the transformation of ideal elements of oppression into breakable matter. The repressed is power, the power of a natural preference of life over death, and the body as a weapon gives it materiality.

Just like KM utilized Gothic elements when writing about the “return of the repressed”, UAWMF published a two-page spread in *Rat* simply titled *The Return of the Long-Hair* [fig. 11]. Since the counterculture “was widely (and usually incorrectly) linked to political and sexual deviance”,⁴² the body of the hippie, by the end of the 1960s, was feminized and thus pathologized, even criminalized.⁴³ Controversies around masculine long hair seeped into many parts of US society, in which its meaning was, for the most part, ambiguous, but that was linked with countercultural positions haunted with historical referents that UAWMF exploited through the association of long hair with Native Americans. In that history,

puritan magistrates in colonial times condemned whites who wore their hair long “after the manner of savages.” Nineteenth-century boarding schools for Indians forced haircuts on their charges because the missionaries who ran them regarded the students’ braids as a refusal to assimilate into white culture.⁴⁴

The image of the Native American at the center of

the spread is a portrait of Geronimo, a legendary Apache leader who led a continuous war against the States of Mexico and the US from around 1851 to 1885; his reputation was built around military achievements against forces deemed superior.⁴⁵ Not only does this set of associations reconfigure the significance of political deviance as positively identified with the ‘primitive’ and the ‘barbaric’ (a radicalization that indeed entails an idealized root of US society), it also claims a reversal of sexual deviance by means of a *virile* reinforcement in which the long hair is simply another masculinity, one that is repressed. Long hair is part of that ‘natural’ weaponization of the hippie’s body no longer feminized but hyper-masculinized, in which the terms of ‘armed love’, as seen above, reject the ‘passivity’ of pacifism and its advocacy for protest and electoral politics. It does so in favor of an activism in which the monstrosity of the hippie and its embodiment of the negative of the entire spectrum of society, linked to a Gothic use of historical narratives and psychological terms, allows for the conception of new (virile) subjects of history.⁴⁶

In this case, it is the hippie and the ‘hip community’ – for which UAWMF has the form of a gang – who will undertake the task of changing the world through the liberation of the (historical) repressed:

The hip revolution is a product of history and could only exist at this time and in this space: it is not a replaying of earlier “Bohemianism”; it is not an “artistic drop out” class only open to the bourgeoisie; it is not an “elite” criticism of Amerikan[sic] culture; & it is not a harmless anomaly [sic] which actually strengthens the dominant repressive environment: IT IS BOTH THE NEGATION & THE ALTERNATIVE TO AMERIKAN PIG BODY AND PLASTIC CONSCIOUSNESS. – It is the possibility of life within the confines of death. Being the child of history it carries a total reality and either destroys these partialities whose dream is to patch things together, or it is itself destroyed. Total Victory is its only end, & Total War its only means.⁴⁷

⁴² Savran 1998, 133.

⁴³ Savran 1998, 133.

⁴⁴ Graham 2004, 524-5. The racial implications were taken up by African Americans, Native Americans and Chicanos when they expressed a preference for wearing *natural* hair over chemically straightened-out and ‘white’ styles.

⁴⁵ See Sonnichsen 1990.

⁴⁶ This idea aligns with the contextual developments of the New Left in the US, in which blacks, students, or the peoples of the Third World come to replace the working class as the driving force behind their philosophy of history. See Jameson 1984, 181.

⁴⁷ *Rat Subterranean News* (1969), vol. 2, no. 3, March 28-April 3. Tamiment & Robert Wagner Archive, New York. PE.036, Box 84.



Figure 11 Rat Subterranean News, vol. 2, no. 3, March 28-April 3, 1969. Tamiment & Wagner Archive, New York

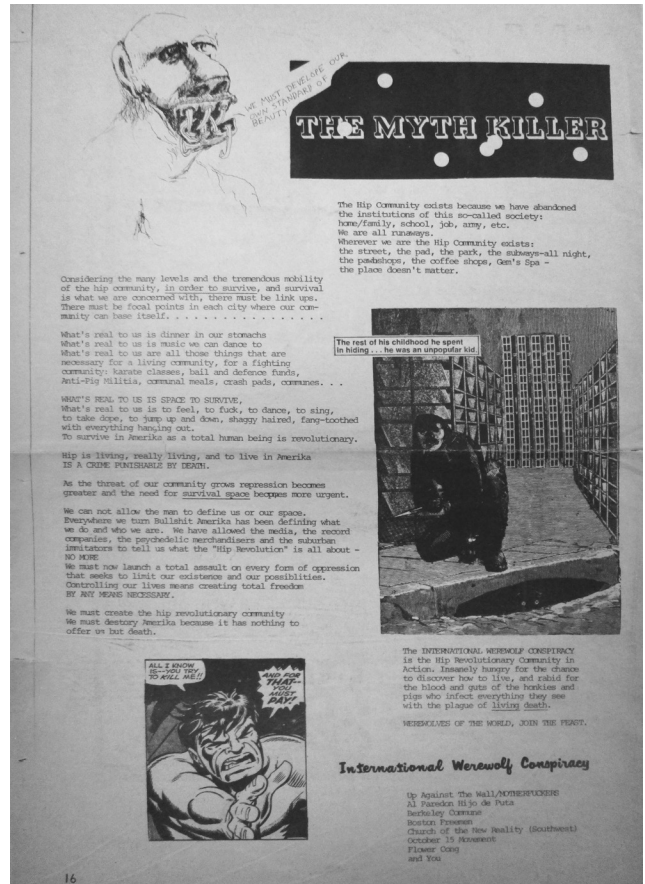


Figure 12 Rat Subterranean News, n/v, n/n, November 15-28, 1968. Tamiment & Wagner Archive, New York

The body politic of the US is here conceived, according to the ‘mind/body’ division operating in the spread’s text, as the materiality of policing and a superficial, vacuous ideality. Of course, ‘pig’ in revolutionary and radical left circles also commonly represents the capitalist, in conjunction, it is a soft, undisciplined corporeality led by greed and a shallow egotism. It is artificial, producing an alienation from self, others, and nature, far from the ‘native’ fusion for which “The Hip Revolution is the re-integration of living processes”.

UAWMF’s avant-garde primitivism makes a parallel out of the threat of the bodies of the Native and the hippie, the return of long hair also the return of ‘natural’ communion and the subsequent destruction of an unhealthy body politic led by an ideological superficiality that inevitably ends with death. The ‘Total War’ that the ‘hip community’ was meant to wage was enacted by UAWMF in its cementation as one of the various gangs in New York’s Lower East Side. It did so by see-

ing itself as a ‘tribe’ within which nature and life came to be expressed freely in the shape of the affinity group, under the concept of ‘armed love’ attempting to operate not only a political divide of us/them, but also a communitarian form of ‘natural’ and - most importantly - virile health, in opposition to the feminized superficiality and sickness of the capitalist body politic.

As UAWMF fragmented into several subgroups under the pressure of the New York authorities, some of its founders, including Ben Morea, created a new organization called the International Werewolf Conspiracy (IWWC). Playing with the acronym of the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWWC and its members also produced images for *Rat*, among which was a sort of manifesto entitled *The Myth Killer* (fig. 12), signed by a multiplicity of organizations (some of which were no more than ten members strong, like the IWWC itself) that were meant to give a threatening sense of ineradicable multiplicity.

It is at this point, late in 1968, that the figure of the werewolf, referenced by KM in their third and last number of *King Mob Echo*, becomes yet another representation of the body and identity of the 'armed love' hippie. "The INTERNATIONAL WEREWOLF CONSPIRACY is the Hip Revolutionary Community in Action", the text reads, "Insanely hungry for the chance to discover how to live, and rabid for the blood and guts of the honkies and pigs who infect everything they see with the plague of living death." It ends with a diversion of the famous slogan of the Communist Manifesto: "WEREWOLVES OF THE WORLD, JOIN THE FEAST."⁴⁸ The 'ugliness' of body hair acquires a new meaning under the guise of the werewolf, and the phrase "We must develop [sic] our own standard of beauty" is uttered by a hairless monster that, in contrast to KM's Medusa, is not a multiplicity in flight but one contained within the singular figure of the creature. The appeal of the texts and images is to assume the monstrosity of the hippie in a new, but still autonomous, way.

A Gothic duality comes into play, with the underground imagery coming to the fore to suggest something as confrontational as UAWMF and its

gang form but hidden in plain sight. Lycanthropy is not a sickness - in fact, it is the power with which to consume and devour those who are truly sick ('honkies and pigs'), to terrorize them in the name of life. With the figure of the werewolf the confused naturalization of the monster and the artificiality of the 'normal' (the hip vs. the straight) suggested by UAWMF reaches a peak in which the threat of the Motherfucker's expressive, natural body transforms into one that is occult, its unnaturalness made opaque by the idea that it is, in fact, the truly natural and healthy.

Nevertheless, the IWWC stopped explicitly referencing nature in the way that UAWMF did, and so the 'natural weapon' of the hippie's body gives way to an internalization dependent on hidden clues and obscure situations, the weapon now hidden as one monstrous body within another. No longer able to confront the State in their own terms, what this Gothic resignification made clear was the group's recession into a conspiratorial mode for which revolutionary corporeality ends up haunting, not destroying, the body politic, like the phantom of the Communist Manifesto.

4 Conclusion

To the presupposed beauty of the rationalist body politic, the two avant-garde collectives considered in this article opposed, in the form of the mob and the gang of hippies, a revolutionary conception of political configuration. While both were rooted in the same vanguardist grounds, they diverged in their particular use of Romanticism and Gothicism, with KM coming to emphasize the *unnatural* virtues of the mob's formlessness, and UAWMF coming to propose a reversal of the 'natural', turning the difference and excess of meanings of both historical and contemporary American monsters into symbols of a natural community opposed to the artificiality of capitalist society.

KM dwelled upon more abstract, general terms in which individual differences are irrelevant in the face of the totality of the spectacular mob, while UAWMF attempted to negotiate a compromise between the individual monstrosity of the hippie and its generalization in the 'Hip Revolution'. Both

groups, however, were keen on embracing the negativity of this othering for revolutionary purposes, seeing in the monstrous body a powerful weapon of critique as well as mobilization, finding in its ugliness a bridge between aesthetics and politics.

With this essay, I hope to have also shown how thinking aesthetics and politics together can be an effective way to historicize the practices of late avant-gardes such as KM and UAWMF. Given the development of new practices such as performance in the 1960s, practices which are meant to further dissolve the distinctions between art and society at large, it is perhaps of particular relevance to utilize concepts such as that of discourse to better bring forth the aims and effects of groups like these in a historical account. Discourse itself aligns perfectly with the modernist ethos of the avant-garde, in the sense that it allows connections across fields that could be thought apart, beginning with art and politics.

⁴⁸ *Rat Subterranean News* (1968), n/v, n/n, November 15-28. New York, Tamiment & Robert Wagner Archive: PE.036, Box 84.

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