

STILLP•INT
A MAGAZINE IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

WHY DANCE IN THE FACE OF WAR?

LUCE DELIRE

Abstract: In this critical-theoretical essay, independent philosopher Luce deLire contends with the intertwinement of war and capitalist exploitation. Writing from Germany as the war in Ukraine continues, deLire first invites readers to inhabit the space between hostility and hospitality. In keeping with this theme, deLire suggests that dancing may offer a space “beyond the war.”

I just prefer to dance in the kitchen, to be honest. Because if this is the last moment of my life, I just want to celebrate. I just want to dance.

– Zi Faámelu¹

War sells. As a response to the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, Germany announced that it would invest an additional one hundred billion Euros into its military. This investment benefits mostly the financial sector and arms dealers, such as Rheinmetall or Heckler & Koch. It also puts German social services at risk, including a health care sector at the brink of collapse, and a chronically-underfunded cultural sector. Yet, the problem with the German military was never a lack of resources. The problems were, and are, corruption and opportunism. Deliveries of arms, tanks, and other supplies are often late, dysfunctional, and excessively expensive. Needless to say: the beneficiaries of corruption and opportunism belong firmly to the one percent. The current war in Ukraine is being used as a cover to redistribute wealth from the poor to the rich, under the guise of humanitarian warfare. Similarly, the war in Afghanistan was hugely profitable—for *some* Americans. In an analysis of the development of stocks of the five largest US defense contractors throughout the past twenty years, Jon Schwarz concludes accordingly: “[F]rom the perspective of some of the most powerful people in the U.S., [the war in Afghanistan] may have been an extraordinary [financial] success.”

Yet corruption, opportunism, and the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor under the guise of humanitarian warfare is not a problem of greed. It's just capitalism. Capitalism in general aims at the accumulation of capital, meaning that the primary motivation for any kind of action under capitalism is related to making money—turning it into an asset and having it produce more of the same. I understand “neoliberal capitalism” to mean an advanced level of universalization of the primacy of capital as a motivational force on all levels (individuals, collectives, the state, international relations, etc.). Under neoliberal capitalism, vestiges of other motivators are increasingly geared towards producing capital. Favors become “favor banking,” moral courage becomes “social capital,” etc. Even spheres allegedly outside the realm of capital effectively function at its service. Thus, the ongoing importance of patriarchal family structures in the USA can be read as a symptom of the withdrawal of social services. Where the state is in withdrawal, the family steps in, effectively enabling state funds to be spent elsewhere—such

as the military. Generally, however, every problem, every crisis, every damage calls for a remedy. Under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, then, every remedy is property, and property inspires spending. And where there's spending, there's accumulation of capital. Therefore, neoliberal capitalism has no interest in ending a war. In fact, neoliberal capitalism has a systemic interest in perpetuating war, keeping it on a low flame, selling more weapons, and generating more capital. It has a systemic interest, furthermore, in never letting anyone "win" or exhaust their resources completely.

You can see the results in Afghanistan, but also in Syria: sheer endless conflict, sheer unfathomable levels of destruction. It's not that there was a central agency sitting behind any of this orchestrating it all for its own benefit, as antisemitism and its upshots, aka "conspiracy theories," often have it. It's worse: war follows from this aspect of capitalism in every separate geopolitical location yet again and separately from one another. Every actor involved in a war—be it through financing, facilitation of international deals, supply of arms, transport, or in another way—is seeking their own profit. Yet together they are pouring oil into the fires of death and destruction.



Future Ancestral Technologies: New Myth - Cannupa Hanska Luger. Courtesy of Garth Greenan Gallery and the artist.

The only real way to minimize armed conflicts is to take the arms out of the conflicts, meaning: planetary demilitarization. Weapons sent into conflict zones may well end up in other conflict zones later on. As Anton Martyniuk points out in a 2017 briefing on "illicit arms" traffic in Ukraine:

For example, the conflicts in 1992 in both the former Yugoslavia and Moldova established a common trade route for illicit weapons and expanded the number and types of weapons available in Ukraine. ... Similarly, Chechen criminals who controlled businesses in Odessa, Donetsk, and Chernovtsy (and the regions surrounding these cities) imported weapons sourced from the conflicts in Chechnya during the first decade of the 21st century.

Every local conflict thus runs the risk of becoming a pressure cooker for the local and global (re)distribution of arms, undermining efforts of demilitarization by flooding black markets with supplies.² This counts for

weapons captured by enemy forces as well, which is why “supporting” one side in a war may always backfire.

What goes for weapons counts for people just as much: violence is going to be exported. Currently, for example, both Russian and Ukrainian militaries are actively seeking the support of “volunteers” and mercenaries trained in the hot spots of past and current conflicts, such as Chechnya or Syria.³ Likewise, European governments actively monitor the fractions of their domestic right-wingers and Nazis that (plan to) travel to Ukraine to join the war—for they might bring the war back with them.⁴ In short: in every armed conflict, there are more such conflicts in the making. Through every armed conflict, both weapons and military training spill over from the conflict zone to other areas, including domestic conflicts. Only planetary demilitarization can meaningfully address this problem.

Yet planetary demilitarization is diametrically opposed to global capitalism in at least three ways:

The first aspect of capitalism that I want to discuss here are *externalities*—moving the expenses over to actors who cannot ask you to pay them back. This is how the exploitation of women in paradigmatic hetero-patriarchal capitalism works: you pay one person (the worker), but you employ two (the worker and his wife, who is doing the reproductive labor). The profitability of nuclear energy works in a similar way: it’s cheap if you don’t factor in the damages of a fallout. It’s cheap because there is no insurance covering for a nuclear power plant, so no insurance policy applies. It’s the state and its people, the community, that carry the risk. In analogy, weapons are cheap *because* neither those suffering from their lethal violence immediately nor those not yet suffering from it (future generations) are factored into the price. In this sense, war is pure exploitation. It’s financed by externalities, with ordinary people having to pay the bill after the fact, some of them paying with their lives.

Another reason why demilitarization opposes capitalism is this: as long as labor is cheaper than technology, people will be exploited and technology will be used to exploit them. Consequently, as long as soldiers fighting and dying (labor) are cheaper than functional international institutions, accountability, and global or planetary politics in the full sense of the term (technology), war will be cheaper than peace. And as long as war is cheaper than peace and produces greater profits, capitalism will fuel the war and use the prospect of peace as its cover to keep it going. Sustainable peace, however, is not merely a question of how many soldiers are employed with which weapons; it’s much more a question of functional, international institutions, reliable international treaties, and trust. It’s a question of technology at least as much as it is a question of labor.

Furthermore, wars are manifestations of negative freedom, understood as absence of external interference. Ideologically speaking, my dildo is *mine* in that I am entitled to determine who can use it and who cannot, as well as how it can be used, and how it cannot. By default, other people are excluded from the use of my property—in order to use it, they have to ask. This power of exclusion is the principle psychological and conceptual basis of property as a social institution. Yet it is only a small step from exclusion to extinction. Property is that thing from which I can exclude everybody at will. The ultimate claim to property, then, is not only to prohibit, disallow, or incapacitate the use of my object by another person *temporarily*, but *permanently*. It is the elimination of that other person altogether. In that way, murder is a direct consequence of the property form, a radical expression of negative freedom. The fact that greed and jealousy are often named as reasons for murder is not accidental—it’s baked into the social formation in which those murders occur in the first place. Yet greed and jealousy in their current form are merely symptoms, while capitalism is the cause.

In a next step, however, we can understand wars for territorial gain in particular as the step from exclusion to extinction, the exertion of the logic of negative freedom over one’s property, in an international frame. For in a war, control, or use of some area by one state or group, is contested by another state or group. And the aim of war is not to undermine this use temporarily, but to incapacitate it permanently. Wars waged not for territorial gains follow the same logic: they may be meant to secure resources, to incapacitate an opponent, or to push a certain ideology. Yet a fundamental dimension of these wars is always to *exclude* someone from the use of, control over, or access to something. Unsurprisingly, the extinction of peoples, species, and cultures follows a similar logic: they are not accepted as legitimate participants in the use of land,

space, or cultural environments, be it explicitly (as in genocide) or implicitly (as in the extinction of species by way of ignorance). They have to go.

Capitalism and war are thus intimately linked, conceptually as well as historically. Large parts of so-called “original accumulation” was accomplished by way of (colonial) warfare, the effects of which are very much alive and kicking in contemporary, racialized “civil” property law.⁵ The appropriation of other people’s land and possessions that can then be integrated into a given economy *as profit* has often been conducted with the help of murder and gunpowder. This is a crucial part of what we call colonialism and its accompanying extraction of resources: conquer their lands, take their riches, ship them to Europe, be rich.

War, then, is not merely profitable, it is hard-wired into the DNA of capitalism as the ongoing universalization of the property form. Planetary demilitarization, then, must go hand in hand with collectivization, de-commodification, and expropriation. In short: planetary demilitarization and anti-capitalism are one and the same thing. You cannot be *for* the war and *against* capitalism, or the other way around. There are only two options: you can stand against the war, against the universalization of private property, or not. You can be a communist. Or you can be complicit.

Despite this rather clear set up, the current situation in Ukraine shows how mediocre international politics generates a spot between a rock and a hard place: of course the heavily outgunned Ukrainians need fresh military machinery, and of course Russia is fighting an unjust war (which is not to say that there was such a thing as a just war). Yet delivering more weapons into the conflict zone runs the risk of escalating other conflicts down the line, pours water into the mills of global capitalism, intensifies oppression and the overall tense global situation, and silences critical thinking on all sides. It’s a total political failure all around—though a profitable failure to be sure.

Capitalism, however, is not everything (just yet). The world does not follow the “pure” order of economic rationality. In fact, nobody needs arguments to do violence. More importantly, violence is perpetrated by itself. It’s a pattern, a tradition that runs besides, underneath, and through the logic of capitalism. Only if violence meets resistance does it reach for rationalization in order to justify itself and keep going. In this sense, rationalization (not *reason*) is the continuation of violence by other means.⁶ And that counts for economic rationalization just as well. Sure, it’s nice that there’s a motivating argument to be violent that’s going to make us rich. But that this is convincing to us is also fueled by long-standing patterns of violence, such as white supremacy, transmisogyny, antisemitism, etc. These patterns are the juicy forces of desire that enable people to *enjoy* the violence they conduct, that have them identify with an organization or a state that sanctions these patterns. And while we strive to collectivize property and tax the rich, capitalism and war can be, must be, unlearned *here*: in our collective relation to the suffocating, ultimately determining, patterns of violence.

Reality always wavers between hospitality and hostility, between intimacy and enmity, between singular and collective. Borrowing a term from Jacques Derrida, I understand “hostipitality” to mean the inevitable indeterminacy between a hospitable and a hostile relation. The shutdown of hostipitality, however, is what we experience as violence—enforced decisions or determinations in this or that direction, be they psychological coercion, hands-on maiming and murder, or otherwise materialized. Now, there is an aesthetic experience of hostipitality that enables us to look at it without fear. Just as we can encounter the overwhelming infinity of stars in the sky, an oncoming storm, or the flood, we can experience hostipitality as just another expression of a power that far surpasses our own. Whenever hospitality tips over into conflict, we can feel compelled to extinguish the blaze, *or*, we can look at it, thinking, “Here’s the flood again” and dwell in the indeterminacy. If, then, the shutdown of hostipitality is a kind of violence, then learning to live inside the problem of hostipitality means to unlearn violence. Rehearsal of such navigation of hostipitality is a constant remainder of a future beyond the violence, and that means: a future beyond (the) war. Antimilitarism means to live inside the problem of hostipitality. And the more problematic the problem, the more urgent it is to insist on it. In this case, even though war has become a continuous and apparently incessant condition, antimilitarism, living inside the problem of hostipitality, is the only way forward. It cannot, however, be merely an individual diatribe against the war. As both hostility and hospitality are relations, hostipitality can only be exercised in context, dwelling in its indeterminacy in relation to and with others. As pointed out earlier, violence and property are integrally linked. Yet property cannot simply

be *abolished*, expropriated or collectivized. It must be *unlearned* as well. And in that sense, unlearning violence means unlearning property. Needless to say that hostipitality cannot immediately stop a war and will not abolish property all by itself. Yet in the long run, learning to live inside the problem of hostipitality will prove inevitable.

Why dance in the face of war? Dance rehearses living inside the problem of hostipitality in this way. In March 2022, Zi Faámelu, Ukrainian pop star and trans icon, told the BBC of the dire situation for trans people in Ukraine, about how the war escalates transmisogyny, and about how many trans women who are legally male cannot leave the country because they are supposed to join the military.⁷ Yet she dances in her kitchen (see epigraph). She insists on the inevitability of a *beyond the war*. It is the navigation of *hostipitality*, surfing the curb between hospitality and hostility—though physically, not conceptually. In dancing, we navigate our physical relation to ourselves, to each other (if there are others), and to the space, the objects around us. We cannot just impose our physicality onto the external world. Dancing is not about the mere exertion of force and not directed towards a single purpose. It is not about endurance, not about self-erasure (as some club kids seem to think), and not about the submission of the body (as some ballet dancers seem to think). It's about receptivity to one's own physicality, to gravity, to social relations, and other material forces. Dancing is a genuine expression of the human condition, of particularity as such. It is exactly what I tried to capture above: an aesthetic experience of the transience of existence, of the navigation between pleasure and pain, between confrontation and invitation, between hostility and hospitality. It's not just the fun of it or the vanity of it that makes dancing a compelling juxtaposition in the face of war. It's the fact that dancing expresses the process of being-human in its essence. In this sense, Zi Faámelu, dancing in her kitchen, is making preparations for the time after the war. And in sharing the experience, she is preserving this post-war condition for us, too. If now nationalists try to render her a traitor because she does not fight at the front, they are essentially siding with Putin who compares the Western boycott with J.K. Rowling being canceled over her stance on trans women:⁸ they spur the fires of war, with violence as the norm of social interaction. Faámelu, however, is doing another job. Naturally, a war can only come to an end either by military or by diplomatic means (supposing for the moment that these can still be meaningfully distinguished). But if nobody prepares for what will come after the war, the war will continue beyond the signing of whatever peace treaty. It's called division of labor. We should all dance in kitchens (or wherever else) from time to time, maybe, never mind where we are.

Dance as a rehearsal of hostipitality is expressed masterfully in Santiago Tamayo Soler's *Retornar*, a queer Latin American post-apocalyptic fantasy video game where we follow the trajectory of the last nine people (all queer and/or trans) on earth after the last war, induced by ecological collapse, has ended. For significant parts of the game, we watch them dance.⁹ However, the determining element of the game is suspense: we see long, slow jump and run sequences, lengthy loading sequences, and even the incredibly entertaining dance sequence towards the end is actually happening in a waiting room. This seems to be an apt description of what the currently unrolling apocalypse will look like for a long time: suspense, waiting, watching it all come down in slow motion. Whenever a war hits the news, it's the same: We read. We wait. We worry. There are sure moments of action, intervention and adrenaline. But even the experience of a war itself consists significantly of waiting. Waiting for the bombs to stop falling. Waiting for the command from above. Waiting for a humanitarian corridor to open. In the very end of *Retornar*, however, it turns out that the last nine people on earth are being collected by alien overlords to serve as biological material to make the earth habitable again after its imminent ecological collapse. Effectively, in the very last minutes of humanity, we see them dancing—with each other, for one another, and for their own enjoyment—to a soundtrack by electronic music producer DJ Minas that invites us to join the post-apocalyptic party.¹⁰ The last nine insist on hospitality for one another in the face of an ultimately hostile, ecologically ruined world. Even during this very last dance, the last nine people on earth preserve an indeterminate, post-apocalyptic future, a relation to one another and to a moment yet to come. This last dance captures that future oriented indeterminacy which lives at the heart of human existence (and which I call "hostipitality" in this essay). As I have argued elsewhere, such material indeterminacy is the core of politically explosive contemporary queer politics.¹¹ In the end, however, the characters in *Retornar* transform into the soil from which new organisms will come to grow. The end of dancing, then, is the end of humanity as well.

For us, the ultimate catastrophe is yet to come. But while we wait for it, we should not forget that the front line does not run between the West and the East, not between Europe and Russia, and not between

different armies or military units. As we know, a war only escalates existing patterns of oppression. Russia is the aggressor here, but NATO uses this aggression to cover its tracks and accelerated exploitative tendencies long under way. The current conflict in Ukraine is already used rather successfully to tighten the grip on national budgets under the guise of collective defense. A decrease of budgets for social purposes is sure to follow. Meanwhile, economic independence from Russian oil is being used as an (additional) argument to greenwash European nuclear energy and thus keep old economic elites afloat. The minoritized, those rendered fragile by existing political economies, will suffer on all sides—in fact, they constitute their own side, whomever they may or may not pledge allegiance to. Russian minorities, for example, have suffered from oppression by an autocratic regime for years already, and things will not get better anytime soon. Worse even, as I have pointed out elsewhere,¹² as long as everything can be turned into a weapon, war lives at the heart of technology and thus remains an inevitable danger. And wherein lies the danger, so grows the darkness.

... if that's all there is my friend, then let's keep dancing.

– Peggy Lee

¹ Cohen, Li. “‘A war within a war’: Transgender woman says transphobia and discriminatory laws keeping her hostage in Kyiv during Russian invasion.” *CBS News*, 1 Mar. 2022, www.cbsnews.com/news/transgender-woman-transphobia-russia-ukraine-invasion/.

² See: Stohl, Rachel. “Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons.” *HSTalks*, 3 Nov. 2008, <https://hstalks.com/t/1042/illicit-small-arms-and-light-weapons/>; *Small Arms Survey*. “Missing Missiles: The Proliferation of Man-portable Air Defence Systems in North Africa.” June 2015, www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SANA-IB2-Missing-Missiles.pdf; *Small Arms Survey*. *Small Arms Survey 2012: Moving Targets*. 4 Mar. 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180831002411/http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/yearbook/small-arms-survey-2012.html>.

³ The Soufan Center. “Foreign Fighters, Volunteers, and Mercenaries: Non-State Actors and Narratives in Ukraine.” Apr. 2022, www.thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/TSC-Special-Report_Ukraine_April-2022.pdf; Wright, Robin. “Will Mercenaries and Foreign Fighters Change the Course of Ukraine’s War?” *The New Yorker*, 5 Apr. 2022, www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/will-mercenaries-and-foreign-fighters-change-the-course-of-ukraines-war.

⁴ For an example, see: Fuchs, Christian, et al. “Wie Neonazis Für Den Krieg in Der Ukraine Rekrutieren.” *Zeit Online*, 3 Mar. 2022, www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2022-03/rechtsextremismus-neonazis-rekrutierung-russland-ukraine-krieg.

⁵ Bhandar, Brenna. *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*. Duke, 2018.

⁶ For a notion of reason beyond rationalization in this sense, see: deLire, Luce. “Queer Feminist Witchcraft: a Spinozistic intervention.” *Magic Compendium*, edited by Katharina Rein, Peter Lang Publishers, 2022 (forthcoming).

⁷ For more on Faámelu, see: Hofmann, Inga. “Flucht Vor Dem Krieg—Zi Faámelu Ist Trans Und Darf Die Ukraine Nicht Verlassen.” *Tagesspiegel*, 6 Mar. 2022, www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/queerspiegel/die-flucht-der-ukrainischen-trans-frau-zi-famelu-meine-einzige-chance-war-durch-die-donau-zu-schwimmen/28203912.html.

Note that her story was publicized partially because of her elevated position as a cultural icon, while many others remain outside the limelight of Western media.

For more on the situation of trans women in Ukraine during the war, see: Tondo, Lorenzo. “‘I will not be held prisoner’: the trans women turned back at Ukraine’s borders.” *The Guardian*, 22 Mar. 2022, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/22/i-will-not-be-held-prisoner-the-trans-women-turned-back-at-ukraines-borders.

Note, however, that some trans women and other trans people in Ukraine chose to stay, join the military, or assist the war efforts in other ways.

⁸ Sauer, Piotr. "Putin Says West Treating Russian Culture like 'Cancelled' JK Rowling." *The Guardian*, 25 Mar. 2022, www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/25/putin-says-west-treating-russian-culture-like-cancelled-jk-rowling.

⁹ Soler, Santiago Tamayo. *Retornar*. Phi Foundation for Contemporary Art, 22 Sept. 2021, <https://archives.fondation-phi.org/en/audio/phi-montreal-santiago-tamayo-soler/>.

¹⁰ <https://soundcloud.com/djminasecu>

¹¹ deLire, Luce. "The New Queer: Aesthetics of the Esoteric Left and Virtual Materialisms." *Public Seminar*, 19 Aug. 2019, <https://publicseminar.org/essays/the-new-queer/>. Note that what I call "indeterminacy" here is called "virtuality" in that essay.

¹² deLire, Luce. "'Fighting the New War': Weaponization and the Essence of Technology." *Thresholds*, vol. 47, 2019, pp. 17-27, https://doi.org/10.1162/thld_a_00669.

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Luce deLire is a ship with eight sails and she lays off the quay. When night falls, she turns into a philosopher, performer, and media theorist. She loves visual art, installations, video art, etc. She could be seen curating, performing, directing, planning, and publishing (on) various events. She is working on and with the philosophy of treason, infinity, atheism, and seduction—across disciplines and in mixed media.

Cannupa Hanska Luger is a multi-disciplinary artist of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, and Lakota descent. Using social collaboration, and in response to timely and site-specific issues, Luger produces multi-pronged projects provoking diverse publics to engage with Indigenous peoples and values apart from the lens of colonial social structuring. He exhibits, lectures, and participates in projects globally.

Future Ancestral Technologies: New Myth is shown here as a photograph, presented in *Stillpoint Magazine* alongside the full film.

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