The Most Inconspicuous Marks

Kristina Lee Podesva

Theodor Adorno once argued that commas make for the “most inconspicuous marks.”[1] Yet in Antonia Hirsch’s *Komma*, which reprints Dalton Trumbo’s anti-war novel *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939) and inserts as well as illuminates these previously missing marks, commas are, by splendid contrast, marquee attractions. Set in white against a black background, they act as signals in a dark and obscure landscape. But they are not merely a matter of space, they are also a matter of time, punctuating a metric rhythm that spans the volume’s pages to suggest an abstract, visual score. They form altogether a code of alternate legibility, requiring, much like Braille, another sense of language for the perception and comprehension of meaning.

Grammatically, the significance of commas lies in their integrative function, which pairs

speakers with dialogue, compiles inventories of items, and joins clauses to one another. Commas do this paradoxically by cutting off texts (in writing) where pauses suspend utterances (in speech). Thus, as binding and isolating agents, they can anchor and simultaneously maroon.

~~*No matter how far you are separated from other people if you have an idea of time why then you are in the same world with them you are part of them but if you lose time the others go ahead of you and you are left alone hanging in air lost to everything forever.*~~ [2]

Limbless, faceless, and nearly senseless, Joe Bonham, the protagonist in Trumbo's novel, contemplates how he is time-less, too. In a small, forsaken corner of a World War I military hospital, he lies incommunicado, grappling with survival, isolation, and sanity by working out measures of time, piecemeal, through painstaking observations. Although he ultimately succeeds in realizing a provisional chronometry, it is a lonely system, known by no one other than himself, a man out of time.

Charting an improbable course through the timeless, placeless void of Joe's existence, *Komma* could be read as a map, its commas acting as critical signposts that facilitate navigation through an ominous and totalizing dark. The gaps between these marks make possible a kind of measurement and comparison, which lend themselves to reference and, by extension, relationship. This is to say that without shared points of reference, there can be no relationships, as Joe himself determines during his permanent reverie. Here, an absolute and cruel autonomy presides that renders everything, apart from ego, into nothing.

~~*No confetti no champagne bottles no yelling no noise at all.*~~ [3]

A less-than-zero-sum game, war and its tendencies and conditions lead to invariably Pyrrhic victories. For the soldiers and citizens it entangles, dying represents war's most peaceful conclusion, while surviving pronounces the grimmest of sentences—a limbo in which joining the dead and returning to the living are remote and unlikely routes forward. The nihilistic urges that underlie militarism leave without a doubt a legacy of immovable agony.

~~*This is a war and war is hell and what the hell and so to hell with it. Come on boys watch this.*~~ [4]

Strikingly, these nihilistic urges are the same impulses that inform the gestures and goals of the last century's artistic avant-garde.[5] Boris Groys observes in avant-garde discourse and practices of modern art an appropriation of military language and an advocacy of destruction in the name of producing radically new forms that annihilate previous iterations. The avant-garde (in this respect at least) overreaches, moving beyond the task of producing new forms to "illustrate, laud, or criticize war as it did earlier" and instead becomes an actor that "wages war itself."[6] Today, artists no longer merely "illustrate, laud, or criticize" war. Unable to compete with the media machine that relays war's documents and theatrics to all available audiences, artists are given a kind of restricted, *prix fixe* menu where "do nothing" or "do anything" are the unappetizing items on offer.

~~*Who is there? Whom is there? Of Whom to who of who to whom.*~~ [7]

Through *Komma*, Hirsch appears to circumvent these limitations. Although the subject of war and the subjectivity of Joe, a critically wounded soldier, suggest case studies for consideration, no one subject overrides another. Rather, it is through an articulation of location and duration that relationships emerge, which in actuality constitute a continuous in-between space that links countless particular subjectivities: soldier to lover to artist to mother to co-worker and so on. While these links extend in countless, complex directions, they cohere around points in space and time that endow life with meaning. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze declares that "[s]ubjectivity is never ours,"[8] but what we share is duration, the experience of time. It is perhaps by connecting *Komma*'s most inconspicuous marks that we are reminded to knit together a net of relationships wide enough to catch us in our universal freefall.

1. Theodor Adorno, "Punctuation Marks," trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *The Antioch Review* 48 (1990), 300.

2. Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun* (New York, Philadelphia, and Toronto: J. B. Lippincott, 1939), 163.

3. Ibid., 181.

4. Ibid., 40.

5. Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008), 122.

6. Ibid.

7. Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 159.

8. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 82–83.

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Christ Has Come Up From Tucson

Maria Muhle

The title of Dalton Trumbo's anti-war novel *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939)[1] is derived from the rallying call "Johnny get your gun," which was meant to encourage young men to enlist in the US army in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The novel itself was directly inspired by a news report about a visit by the Prince of Wales to a soldier who, having lost all of his senses and limbs during World War I, was lying in a Canadian veterans' hospital. The book tells the story of the young American soldier Joe Bonham, who volunteers for war, leaves his girlfriend behind, and is severely wounded in combat. The narration starts with Joe's memories of his father's death, which he associates with the rhythm of a telephone ringing insistently. His inability to get up and answer the phone, like in a nightmare, gives way to Joe's realization of his own present situation:

“*~~He was a sick man and he was remembering things. Like coming out of ether. But you’d think the telephone would stop ringing sometime. It couldn’t just go on forever~~*.”[2] The narrative unfolds in order to document this very fact: that the telephone, which is part of a dream, will actually go on ringing forever, and that nobody can stop it precisely because it belongs to Joe’s imagination and not to reality, the sounds of which he will never hear again. The process of becoming aware that there is no way to escape the enclosure of his mutilated body proceeds from this first discovery of his deafness to the realization of the fact that “they” cut off both his arms and legs, that instead of a mouth, jaws, eyes, and nose, all he has left is a large hole, and that he thus cannot speak, smell, or see. . . Of his five senses, he has only one left: touch. “*~~No legs. No more running walking crawling if you have no legs. No more working. No legs you see. Never again to wiggle your toes. What a hell of a thing what a wonderful beautiful thing to wiggle your toes. No no. If he could only think of real things he would destroy this dream of having no legs. Steamships loaves of bread girls Kareen machine guns books chewing gum pieces of wood Kareen but thinking of real things didn’t help because it wasn’t a dream. It was the truth~~*.”[3]

The formal peculiarity of the narration becomes plainly visible in these enumerations of memories from Joe’s former life: the absence of commas throughout the novel.[4] This stylistic device has often been interpreted as reflecting a stream of consciousness. Borrowing a term coined in psychology by William James, this literary tool presents a radically subjective view through a typically modern formalist abstraction, which counters a nineteenth-century realism or naturalism. But instead of pointing at this radical opposition between abstraction and representation, modernism and realism, the total lack of commas can also be read as something other than a modernist metaphor for the absence of “sense” from the world. Commas create the rhythm of the written word—and their absence in Trumbo’s text raises a series of questions. The lack of commas in the novel emphasizes the lack of rhythm in Joe Bonham’s life (“*~~he was stone deaf~~*”—that is, he could not even hear the pulse of his own heartbeat) and therefore marks his necessary dependence on the outside world. The commas are a metaphor for rhythm—a metaphor for the fact that Joe’s life among the dead is reduced to questions of rhythm and structure: of chasing time as it goes by, of daily routines encoded in the vibrations of footsteps coming and going. The lack of commas also announces the *dénouement* of the story: Joe’s realization that the rhythmic artifice of Morse code functions as the only way out of the “*~~darkness of his own skull~~*.”[5] Finally, and perhaps most notably, Trumbo’s decision to write without commas subtly underscores the life Joe is reduced to, that of the “living flesh”—the Greek *komma* refers to something that is cut off, like Joe’s limbs, by both the shell and the medical corps, so that he now has “*~~no legs and no arms and no eyes and no ears and no nose and no mouth and no tongue~~*.”[6]

Within this frame, the history of the book and its circulation become significant. Inspired by the story of the Canadian soldier, Trumbo wrote the book in 1938 and published it the following year, two days after the beginning of World War II.[7] While pursuing fiction writing, Trumbo was also successfully working as a screenwriter for the film industry in Los Angeles and was a member of the left-wing Screen Writers Guild, the precursor to the Writers Guild of America. In 1947, Trumbo—also a member of the Communist party at the time—was subpoenaed to appear in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, to which he refused to give testimony. As one of the so-called Hollywood Ten, he was convicted of contempt, for which he served a one-year prison sentence.

In 1971 Trumbo adapted the novel and later directed a film of the same title. Thanks to the intervention of Luis Buñuel, Jean Renoir, and Otto Preminger, the film was included in the official program at the Cannes Film Festival in the same year, where it won the Special Jury Prize. But unlike the novel, the film does not formally address the problematics of how to reflect the “point of view” of someone who is reduced to haptic perception. It is filmed in a rather traditional way, presenting Joe’s interior monologue through voice-over and the exchanges of the medical staff through common dialogues, a narrative strategy that is completely absent from the novel. These formal concessions to the film’s narration fail to match the novel’s ability to unsettle the reader and to maintain him or her in a state of suspension analogous to Joe’s state of uncertainty, between reality and dream.

Julian Schnabel’s film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007) attempts to describe a physiological phenomenon similar to that experienced by Joe Bonham. Based on the memoirs of Jean-Dominique Bauby, an editor at French *ELLE*, the film tells the story of a man who suffers a severe stroke at the age of 42, leaving him with “locked-in syndrome”—entirely paralyzed but with a perfectly functioning brain. But

1. Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun* (New York, Philadelphia, and Toronto: J. B. Lippincott, 1939). All quotations in the text are from this edition.

2. Ibid., 16.

3. Ibid., 80.

4. Only one comma appears in the book: “Thanks Rudy, I’ll let you know when everything’s finished.” Ibid., 11–12.

5. Ibid., 233.

6. Ibid., 83.

7. Even though the text was openly against American involvement in any type of warfare, it won the American Booksellers Award in 1940, a year before the United States finally entered World War II.

even though Bauby's only possible means for communication was the movements of one eyelid, he, unlike Joe Bonham, could still perceive the world around him. The first part of Schnabel's film is shot entirely from the restricted perspective of Bauby's left eye, creating a surrealist image of reality. In Trumbo's film this surreal element is restricted to Joe's dream sequences based on the novel. Even though both Trumbo and Schnabel's films treat the radical incapacities of the characters from formally different perspectives, both films reflect on the production of what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life," one through war and the other through "cultural forms" that are part of the society of the spectacle—the fashion world, a commercial mass culture that, as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer stated in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), obeys the same capitalist logic of alienation as totalitarian warfare.[8]

What Trumbo proposes with *Johnny Got His Gun* and what explains the extreme popularity of both the novel and the film during the Anti-Vietnam War movement is a genealogy of the form of bare, or radically exposed life, for which Joe's reduced life is a paradigmatic example. Joe addresses this genealogy by asking himself why he decided to go to war: "~~*Oh why the hell did you ever get into this mess anyhow? Because it wasn't your fight Joe. You never really knew what the fight was all about*~~."[9] The causal chain that led to war, then to the hospital bed, and finally to Joe being reduced to "living flesh" is based on his admitted naiveté regarding the nature and character of the war. Only when it is too late does he realize his ignorance regarding what he was really expected to fight for, his ignorance regarding the meaning of these "~~*special kinds of words*~~"—like liberty or freedom—that "~~*the little guys were always getting killed for*~~."[10] Trumbo's fierce critique is directed towards the abstraction of such values, but also the abstraction of decency, honour, democracy, independence, manhood (when the soldiers ought to defend the "~~*beautiful French and Belgian girls*~~" from being raped by the "~~*dirty Huns*~~"[11]); at the same time he addresses the question of the cultural relativism of these "Western" values: "~~*Is the American honor for the world we're fighting for? Maybe the South Sea Islanders like their honor better*~~."[12]

What Trumbo's novel paradigmatically and provocatively shows is, thus, the link between the form of life Joe Bonham is reduced to after his "encounter with the shell"—presented in a sort of meta-interior monologue as inevitable: ~~*Somewhere it is being prepared...... It glistens in the factory light and it has a number and the number is mine. I have a date with the shell. We shall meet soon.*~~[13]—and the life of "~~*every doughboy and tommy and poilu and what the hell did they call the Italians*~~?"[14] This enumeration of what Michel Foucault has called "the infamous" lies at the heart of Trumbo's critique, which addresses at once the intuitive relation between the class origin of the soldiers and their life expectancy, and their ability to speak for themselves and to be heard. Joe's total isolation from the world, and the impossibility of communicating that is at the centre of the narration and its interior monologue form, serve as an allegory for the speechless and invisible part of humanity. In the novel, speechlessness is presented as a physiological condition, i.e., as a *natural* condition of the infamous. The concern for maintaining this natural semblance is that of the ruling class; to prove it as arbitrary and unfounded—or even more explicitly, to prove it as artificial and fostered by the ruling class and "their war"—is what the dominated have to fight for.

It is a question of language that defines the dividing line between the human and the animal, i.e., the line that sets apart the ruled from the ruling. In his book *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben differentiates the "anthropological machine of the moderns" from the "machine of earlier times"; these machines negotiate the status of language as the dividing line between man and animal in different ways:

"What distinguishes man from animal is language, but this is not a natural given already inherent in the psychophysical structure of man; it is, rather, a historical production which, as such, can be properly assigned neither to man nor to animal. If this element is taken away, the difference between man and animal vanishes, unless we imagine a non-speaking *man—Homo alalus*, precisely—who would function as a bridge that passes from the animal to the human."[15]

This thesis, originally put forward by the linguist Heymann Steinthal in 1877, implies a fundamental contradiction, as Steinthal himself states:

"The prelinguistic stage of intuition can only be one, not double, and it cannot be different for animal and for man. If it were different, that is, if man were naturally higher than the animal, then the origin of man would not coincide with the origin of language, but rather with the origin of his higher form of intuition out of the lower form which is the animal's. Without realizing it, I presupposed this origin: in reality, man with his human characteristics was given to me through creation, and I then sought to discover the origin of language in man. But in

8. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Continuum, 1969).

9. Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 36.

10. Ibid., 144–46.

11. Ibid., 147.

12. This is a question that is still effective in current warfare whose aim is supposed to be the exportation of human rights to those countries that are allegedly in need of them. For a discussion of humanitarian warfare, see Jacques Rancière, "Who is the Subject of Human Rights?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (spring/summer 2004), 297–310.

13. Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 227.

14. Ibid., 229.

15. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003), 36–37. Luigi Romeo gives the following definition of the term *homo alalus*: "In Greek it literally means 'without speech' (in Latin *infans*), and as such it was used by E. Haeckel to label any primate existing between ape and Man. The term *alalus* was actually used in connection with *Pithecanthropus* 'ape-man,' which was coined by Haeckel in the last part of the 19th century to indicate the 'missing link' between apes and Man under the influence of Darwin's theory on evolution." Luigi Romeo, *Ecce homo! A Lexicon of Man* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1979), 6–7.

this way, I contradicted my presupposition: that is, that the origin of language and the origin of man were one and the same; I set man up first and then had him produce language."[16]

Agamben's anthropological machine therefore does not relate to two different and fundamentally divided categories of the living (human and animal) but to two states or forms of life that are mutually produced by exclusion or inclusion: "the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside."[17] While the machine of "earlier times" produces a "non-man" through the humanization of an animal—"the man-ape, the enfant sauvage or Homo ferus, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form"[18]—the modern anthropological machine produces the outside through the exclusion of an inside, "by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus*, or the ape-man."[19]

Both machines function by establishing a zone of indifference, a zone of exception at their centres where the articulation between human and animal, man and animal, or speaking being and merely living being must take place. What occurs in this zone is the continually renewed decision about these differences. The life that inhabits this zone of indistinction is neither human nor animal but "bare life," a life that is always exposed to the sovereign decision of being pushed on the side of the human, speaking being, or, conversely, pushed on the side of speechless animal life. This is a life in-between, Joe's life "*~~beyond life~~*" and "*~~beyond death~~*" and "*~~even beyond hope~~*."[20]

Johnny Got His Gun shows the two machines at work: the humanization of the living flesh through communication—and a language of rhythm rather than words—and the animalization of a human being through the denial of communication—a life pushed back into "*~~darkness desertion loneliness silence horror unending horror~~*."[21] Joe's re-humanization is ironically symbolized by the Christian *topos*: in the narration his eventual re-communication with the outer world takes place through his nurse's Christmas wishes, written on Joe's chest. In a whirling of thoughts, Joe conflates this experience with a Christmas carol his mother used to sing and memories of the biblical Christmas story—recounted in his own words and ending with Mary's eyes "*~~filled with pain and fear for the little baby~~*."[22] It is thus Christ who leads Joe back into the world, who resurrects him through communication with the outer world—only to be expelled from it irrevocably by the military doctors because they fear his testimony against war. But Christ appears in his "infamous" form—the son of a carpenter, a man of the people. Through a hallucinatory dream, Joe describes Christ playing blackjack with the soldiers doomed to die on the battlefields: "*~~The boy was Christ and he had come up from Tucson and now his mother was hunting and crying for him~~*."[23] Christ and the soldiers share the same destiny. They become indifferent:

> *~~Christ he's already dead and the big Swede over there is going to catch the flu and die in camp and you in the corner you're going to get blown so damned high nobody'll ever have a souvenir and me I'm going to get buried in a trench cave-in and smother now isn't that a hell of a way to die?~~*[24]

Within these frequent, descriptive enumerations, the conspicuous absence of commas suggests a conflation of the terms being listed. In the passage above, Trumbo collapses hierarchies between the American "doughboys" and Christ. Similarly, the film continually returns to scenes that represent the poor and disenfranchised as the protagonists of the narrative.[25]

If the re-humanization of the living flesh is experienced as an almost religious (however—or precisely because of that—impossible) resurrection, the modern anthropological machine that animalizes the human form is presented in two different ways: as operating both unintentionally and intentionally. While Trumbo's film addresses this animalization and its dangers much more explicitly than the book, the latter remains in a zone of indistinction, in a doubt about the intentionality of this process of shutting down any possibility of communicating with the outside world, any perception and any possibility of putting "*~~a tiny little idea that is in my mind~~*" into the mind of those who stand "*~~maybe three feet away~~*."[26] The film sets up an aprioristic structure that prepares the viewer for the misapprehension of Joe's situation with his first medical report, which explains that any repetitive movement from him should be seen as reflexive only, since the patient was "completely decerebrated." But even though this diagnosis is proven wrong, the medical approach towards Joe does not change, or at least not for the better, but for the worse. What follows is a shift from the unintentional misunderstanding of Joe's condition to an intentional misreading of the message that it is delivering. The medical staff seem unaware, or unwilling to believe, that war has reduced Joe Bonham's body to a monstrous form. Joe's dreams of being transformed back into a "normal" person through

16. Heymann Steinthal, *Abriss der Sprachwissenschaft: Einleitung in die Psychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1881, 355–56; originally published 1871), quoted and translated by Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, ibid., 36.

17. Ibid., 37.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid. The quote continues: "And it is enough to move our field of research ahead a few decades, and instead of this innocuous paleontological find we will have the Jew, that is, the non-man produced within the man, or the *néomort* and the overcomatose person, that is, the animal separated within the human body itself."

20. Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*, 300.

21. Ibid., 301.

22. Ibid., 267.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 247.

25. This vision is echoed by Erich Auerbach, who writes that within biblical realism the "sublime, tragic, and problematic take shape precisely in the domestic and the commonplace" and not among the members of the ruling class. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003), 22. This is also a main topic of Pier Paolo Pasolini's films; see Georges Didi-Huberman, *La survivance des Lucioles* (Paris: Minuit, 2010).

26. Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun,* 273.

communication are thus dashed as the military doctors realize his efforts and understand the potential damage the testimony of this living dead man would bring to the image of war.[27]

Joe's monstrous body is the medium that carries the message of the terrors of war, and therefore it has to be denied visibility. Cut off from all contact by the army medical staff, Joe is reduced to his bare life, between the living, with whom he cannot engage, and the dead, whose radical passivity he cannot achieve. It is, perhaps, in his physical inability to commit suicide that his existence in a state of exception appears most clearly. Since, as Foucault has written, suicide is one way of withdrawing from the modern forms of biopower that completely invest life.[28] To withdraw from life is to withdraw from the omnipresent power over life. The precarious, infamous, and bare life is precisely the form of life that is incapable of withdrawing from the strategies of power on whose care it relies and depends. The question that Dalton Trumbo raises is not so much that of the reaction of power structures to figures of bared life, but their actual constitution and genealogy: the process of becoming bare, infamous, or freakish—a process that is not, as one might be led to believe, a natural or physiological condition. Rather, it is an artificial, man-made situation, produced through the attribution of positions in the darkness and in the light. To paraphrase Bertolt Brecht's[29] *Threepenny Opera*: "There are some who are in darkness; And the others are in light; And you see the ones in brightness; Those in darkness drop from sight."

Joe Bonham's incapacity to perceive the world, to communicate with others and interact with his surroundings is, in this way, reversed. It mirrors an incapacity of others to perceive the terrors of war, to hear the message that is tapped and hammered onto the sheets of a hospital bed, and, ultimately, the incapacity to understand that states of exception are never physiological or accidental, but always the result of an exercise of power.

27. In a dreamlike sequence, Joe envisions himself as an attraction at carnival fairs, similar to one of the characters in Ted Browning's film *Freaks* (1932). In this film, the rallying call "We accept her! One of us!" uttered by the "freaks," who also include a "Human Torso," at the wedding reception of Hans the dwarf and the beautiful trapeze artist Cleopatra, already announces her ultimate "animalization," as she will be transformed into a "human duck" and will thus be violently inducted into the freak community. The performance of power thus belongs to the freaks, and not, as in Trumbo's novel, to the "normal people." These dream scenes from the film are directly referenced by Metallica in their music video *One* (1987).

28. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998), 138.

29. Brecht was ordered together with Trumbo to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947.

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