

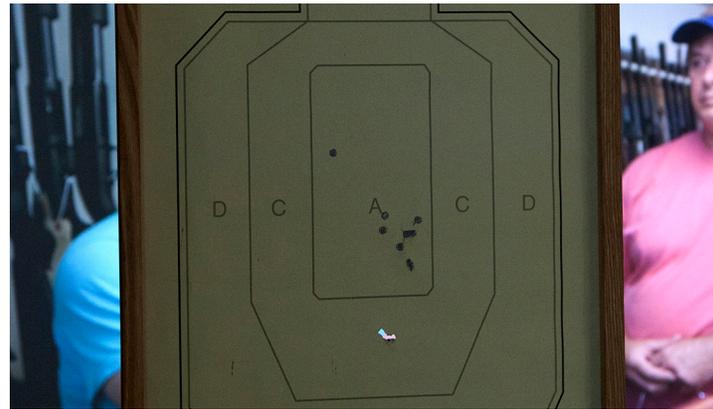


Schmitt, You and Me Juli Carson

*Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.*¹

History is ripe to repeat when certain geopolitical phenomena are in alignment. Consider the latest constellation of events appearing to connect nineteen-thirties Germany with the present-day United States: mass frustration with a liberal free market, public contempt for congressional gridlock, the election of an unforeseen far-right populist sovereign, the establishment of a anti-corporatist narrative and the banning of an outside enemy. But, as Heraclitus famously said, even when history repeats we never step in the same river twice, because repetition is no mere duplication. Rather, historical events—aesthetic, political and theoretical—are always happening in the present, as if for the first time. From this perspective, the sum total of past events haunting us now can no more be repressed as *gone* than they can be received as *here*. For those of us not happily aligned with this uncanny alignment, the present seems to hover in suspended animation—a temporal abyss—between a perceived historical origin and a desired political future. As Lenin famously asked, for completely different reasons, “What is to be done?” One possible answer: When historical constellations return, practitioners of critical aesthetics need to repeat more *conscientiously*. Which is to say, they need to “work through” the past, as Sigmund Freud put it, toward achieving a different end. Metaphorically, this entails a kind of filmic time travel, whereby a protagonist returns to a past event in a preemptive move, for example, to defuse a bomb that threatens to destroy the future.

Omar Mismar’s film installation *Schmitt, You and Me* is one such endeavor at time travel. And the bomb? That would be Carl Schmitt’s “friend-enemy” paradigm, the cornerstone of the German political theorist’s “total” state. According to Schmitt, when an enemy enacts an existential threat to a nation, the sovereign authority has the legal power to impose a “state of exception,” suspending the governing constitution and thus the law. Schmitt’s worldview was formed in the nineteen-twenties Weimer Republic. Soon after, he became the “crown jurist” of the Third Reich, when the burning of the Reichstag in 1933 ushered in Hitler’s perpetual state of exception. Even so, Schmitt’s ideas appealed to more than just the Nazis. Select members of the Marxist Frankfurt School also found his ideas compelling. In 1930, Walter Benjamin wrote the jurist: “[Y]our mode of research in the realm of political philosophy has confirmed my own mode of research in matters concerning



the philosophy of art.”² And Schmitt’s appeal doesn’t end there. If something about Schmitt continues to stick, it might be the state of the exception’s paradoxical status, what Giorgio Agamben calls its “being-outside, and yet belonging” topological structure.³ As Schmitt put it: “[T]he sovereign stands outside of the normally valid juridical order, and yet belongs to it, for it is he who is responsible for deciding whether the constitution can be suspended in toto.”⁴ This borderline status—the sovereign’s indeterminate zone between law and anomie—similarly defines the enemy’s relation to the friend. Although the enemy—that collective embodiment of the “not me” appears to be outside the friend’s milieu, the enemy is quintessential to the nation-state as its *raison d’être*. Annihilate your enemy and you annihilate yourself. Therein lies the bomb. Therein lies the reason Schmitt *sticks*.

*The enemy is the embodiment of your own question.*⁵

Schmitt, You and Me opens with an arresting shot. A middle-aged white man stands behind the counter of a gun shop, gazing silently into the camera. Framed by a row of rifles, he sports a baseball cap reading: “Trump Fence Building Co. Free Installation.” As Roland Barthes would say, this description is the denotative meaning of the shot. Since the film was produced prior to the 2017 US presidential election and exhibited after Donald J. Trump’s inauguration as the 45th American president, this *mise-en-scène* stops time in its tracks. And when time is arrested, myth enters the picture. For this scaffolding of signifiers (*a white man in a gun shop wearing a Trump hat promoting a border wall*) is rife with political connotation. Evocative of Schmitt’s friend-enemy paradigm, the man’s political posture is clear: For America to be a great nation, one based upon the sacrosanct Second Amendment right to bear arms, a sovereign authority needs to secure her borders against the enemy. The film thus begins with a double-edged myth, one historical (Schmitt’s *friend-enemy*), the other contemporary (Trump’s *Make America Great Again*). Mismar, however, wedges an aesthetic proposition *between* these myths and defuses their explosive entanglement, which brings us to the film’s backstory. While residing in Skowhegan, Maine, Mismar frequented a local gun shop, hanging out with its owner Bruce and shop manager Bailey. After receiving a crash course in aiming and firing a gun at a shooting range, Mismar asked Bruce and Bailey if they would read excerpts from Carl Schmitt’s 1932 text *The Concept of the Political* on camera in their shop. Flash forward to the film’s establishing shot. Breaking the silence, Bruce reads from a paper held in hand: “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy...The political enemy is the



other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specifically intense way, existentially something different and alien.”

Throughout Mismar’s film, Bruce and Bailey stammer and stutter through Schmitt’s text. They read the more difficult passages over again or question the meaning of words they trip over: *atavistic*, *enmity*, *inimicus*, *hostis*. A couple of times they stop to read the text silently, Mismar beside them. In the course of working through the text, under the artist’s stationary camera-eye, Bruce and Bailey *rehearse* Schmitt’s words for a future, more perfect performance, which never arrives. The distinction between rehearsal and performance subsequently collapses, producing a filmic state of contingency—or *exception*—unmediated by Mismar’s straightforward edits. Jean-Luc Godard created this kind of contingency by slowing down, stopping or speeding up his shots, producing an audiovisual “stutter” that interrupts the film’s continuity. In *Schmitt, You and Me*, such interloping contingencies are not aesthetically staged. Rather, they’re aesthetically put *on stage*. Curators Sabeth Buchmann, Ilse Lafer and Constanze Ruhm have recently argued that rehearsal-as-narrative appears “predominantly during periods of artistic-aesthetic and sociocultural transformations.”⁶ If so, then Mismar’s rehearsal of Schmitt might be a response to the 24/7 digital *screen-of-consciousness* prevalent in art and politics today, in which bots, memes and YouTube reality shorts mythically buttress an existential threat that mimes Schmitt’s friend-enemy paradigm. But this Internet enemy is reduced to stereotype, unlike the paradoxical version that *The Concept of the Political* performatively rehearses. For Schmitt, too, employed rhetorical starts, stops and repetitions in the writing of his text, through which his concept of the political ultimately *stutters* into ambiguity. This leaves Bruce and Bailey to ponder just where this allusive enemy is, in both the text and their real lives.

Which brings us to the absurdly sane idea of rehearsing Schmitt’s friend-enemy paradigm in a gun shop. As Bailey notes up front: “I think what you want to know is how this all trickles down to people who want to buy guns for protection.” This abstract question, performed *in situ*, presents two backdrops: one discursive (Schmitt), the other tangible (firearms), bound together by the qualia of phallic lure. For any abstract evocation of an “enemy” commands an equal and concrete presentation of a “shield.” What else does the alpha male display of rifles represent but a *fascinum*, that ancient Roman amulet for a divinized phallus, a shield to ward off the enemy’s “evil eye.”⁷ At the same time, the film’s players display a general *lack* of expertise over Schmitt’s enemy concept. What “trickles down,” then,

is a “laying bare” of what lies at the core of the enemy-friend paradigm. And that “core” is the repressed fact that Schmitt’s discursive shield—one meant to protect nations against an external, existential *presence*—more truthfully instances an internal, existential *lack* within the act of a “friend” calling out an “enemy.” This “lack” is none other than the knowledge that behind the phallic mask of certitude, behind all our shields, lies nothing but our subjectivity tangled up with the Other. Bailey derives as much, when he pivots from discussing the psycho-dynamics of gun possession to that of waging war: “[It’s] all subjective. What do *they* feel it is about you that makes them want to wage war? They believe they are right to everything they are doing.” To which Bruce responds: “And, of course, we believe they are wrong.” Having thus driven into the cul-de-sac of Schmitt’s philosophical ambiguity, Bruce pauses before looking into the camera and asking: “Where do we go from here, Omar?”

The “state of exception” in which we live is not the exception but the rule.⁸

Flash back to 1945. The war is over. The American prosecutorial team at Nuremberg arrests Carl Schmitt as an “intellectual instigator,” but he’s hard to indict. Was the Reich’s crown jurist legally culpable for Nazi persecutions at home and war crimes abroad? Or was he one of the most “eminent political writers of [his] time,” whose analysis of Weimer’s political structure might have led to its preservation, as Karl Lowenstein, Berlin advisor to the American prosecutors, countered.⁹ Perhaps Schmitt was both, Lowenstein concluded. By 1936, Schmitt had fallen out with the SS, most likely because sympathizer-intellectuals were as dangerous to totalitarianism as the mob gangster.¹⁰ He was an enemy of *both* Germany and the United States, and in his denouement, Schmitt was to become the exception *himself*. And yet, as his political capital waned, for some, his aesthetic-theoretical appeal persisted. As late as 1940, Benjamin abided by Schmitt’s observation that the exception, which proved everything, was more interesting than the rule, with one caveat. Whereas Schmitt’s sovereign authority transcended the very exception he declared, Benjamin’s Baroque sovereign—put forth in his *Trauerspiel*—transcended his transcendence vis-à-vis his human flaws. Such double negation re-entered Benjamin’s sovereign *back* into the world, the exception to the rule now becoming the rule. Samuel Weber interprets Benjamin’s move thusly: “The otherness that is no longer allowed to remain transcendent therefore reappears this side of the horizon, represented as a cataract, abyss, or fall. Or even more radically, as allegory.”¹¹

Mismar and Benjamin are fellow travelers. The sovereign of *Schmitt, You and Me*, which is to say, its director, neither transcends the *mise-en-scène* nor is relegated to its margins. The world Mismar captures is, indeed, within his invisible camera eye, but he—the sovereign authority of the artwork—is simultaneously *caught* in the picture. Though we rarely see him, he’s consistently on the side of the filmic horizon conventionally reserved for aesthetic illusion, as a kind of cataract in the gaze of directorial mastery. Sometimes, it is a small gesture, such as leaving in his first incorrect attempts at defining the words *inimicus* and *hostis*. Other times, it’s awkwardness. Given Mismar’s Lebanese heritage, his silent off-camera presence hovers over Bruce and Bailey’s conversation about Middle Eastern “Holy Wars.” But the sovereign-artist’s exceptional presence as pure otherness—being outside but still belonging—is most powerfully felt through the film’s allegorical impulse. Which is this: an artist

(a stranger) enters a gun shop (an NRA lair). In the language of the culture wars, this is the quintessential friend-enemy situation. As I’ve lain out, however, Mismar’s aesthetic process—that of cultural *encounter*—diffuses such a standoff. If it’s true, as Schmitt said, that “the sovereign is he who decides the exception,” then in Omar Mismar’s art of encounter, the exception is always, in the end, the artist him - or herself.

- 1 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5.
- 2 Horst Bredekamp, “Walter Benjamin’s Esteem for Carl Schmitt,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 679.
- 3 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 35.
- 4 Carl Schmitt, cited in Agamben, *State of Exception*, 35.
- 5 Carl Schmitt, “Ex Captivitate Salus” (1947), cited in Bredekamp, “Walter Benjamin’s Esteem for Carl Schmitt,” 682. Also cited by Jacob Taubs, *To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 37.
- 6 Sabeth Buchmann, Ilse Lafer and Constanze Ruhm, *Putting Rehearsals to the Test: Practices of Rehearsal in Fine Arts, Film, Theatre, Theory, and Politics* (Vienna: Sternberg Press, 2016), 14.
- 7 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), 118.
- 8 Walter Benjamin, cited in Bredekamp, “Walter Benjamin’s Esteem for Carl Schmitt,” 686.
- 9 Joseph W. Bendersky, “Carl Schmitt’s Path to Nuremberg: A Sixty-Year Reassessment,” *Telos* 139 (Summer 2007), 16.
- 10 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), 339.
- 11 Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s Abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 187.

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Omar Mismar Schmitt, You and Me

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