

A One-Sided World

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When the Compact Disc first emerged in the 1980s, it contributed to the undermining of one of our most long-held assumptions. With the CD, the distinction between Side A and Side B of the old vinyl record was collapsed. With the CD, our choice of tracks is all on the one side.

The CD's collapsing of the Side A / Side B distinction paralleled that other world-historic collapse of the late '80s: the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the disappearance of the boundaries between Eastern and Western Europe. Before the Wall came down, it seemed as if it was only the sky, the clouds and the angels over Berlin that united the East and West sides of the city. What is it now that brings the two sides together? What kind of unification is this?

No matter how many guards were posted at the Wall, no matter how many road-blocks were set up, there was inevitably something that escaped, that penetrated the Wall: *information*. Information in the sense of human relationships stripped of their aura and transmitted through cables and across the airwaves. Information of the kind that penetrates every hidden horizon, every pocket of silence, and every wall of mystery. Words, sounds, images, capital.

As these words, sounds, images, capital have crossed the walls, the cities, the national boundaries and the globe at an ever accelerating pace, they have blurred the various kinds of boundaries and distinctions that had formerly been taken for granted. The distinctions between 'here' and 'there', the 'near' and the 'distant', 'this side' and 'the other side' have all collapsed. All of these distinct spaces have now become part of the same flattened-out homogenous space.

The Compact Disc itself arises out of this distinctionless age of information. To ask what is on the *other* side of the CD is a bit like asking what lies *beyond* the edge of the Universe, or, what happened *before* the Big Bang? It is a nostalgic question, which can only be asked, and only makes sense, from the perspective of earlier and increasingly submerged ways of understanding the world. The response can sound absurd: *there is no other side*.

The disappearance of the other side corresponds to what historian Barbara Duden has referred to as the "loss of horizon". The image of the earth as a blue sphere floating in space is a symptom of the loss of any earthly horizons. Similarly, the image of the foetus inside a woman's body has contributed to the fading of the distinction between the seen and the unseen.

This quest to go beyond the horizon and conquer new territories and spaces has been a characteristic feature of the modern age — from colonial expansion to the new frontiers of the atom, the gene, the outer space of the universe, and the inner space of women's bodies. Our inner-most desires and emotions have also been infiltrated and exposed to manipulation by the advertising, entertainment and therapeutic industries. The loss of these and other horizons of everyday life entails the elimination of the boundaries and limits within which the expansion of the market and technological control were formerly contained.

When horizons fade and boundaries collapse, and there is no longer an other side that is *other* to our own — the distant, the unseen, the beyond, the unknown —

then what space is there left for the imagination to flow into? Without an other side, what space or standpoint is there from which to imagine something that is fundamentally *other* to our own reality?

For the childhood imagination, the other side has been a world of mystery, play, and fantasy. For the spiritual imagination, the other side has been the source of meaning and a resting place for the soul. For the radical political imagination — the utopian imagination — the other side has carried the vision and the promise of a fundamentally different society and way of life.

To the extent that there is no longer an other side, the imagination merely comes to reflect the everyday, but is unable to step outside of it, to transcend it, or to become 'other' to it. Without the poetic imagination, what is there to sustain and suffuse the everyday, to prevent it from becoming banal? Perhaps the disappearance of the other side entails the end of mystery, the end of faith, the end of utopian visions? Perhaps a world without distance is a world without metaphor; a world without limits is a world without possibilities; and a world without an other side is a world without hope?

In the absence of an other side, it is only those possibilities which appear as already present, visible and easily accessible that tend to occupy our hearts and minds. In particular, it is those images that appear on our television and computer screens that now seem to hold our attention.

I tried to imagine what other possibilities there might be, as I climbed onto the ruins of the Wall and looked out over my Berlin — the Berlin of my metaphors. The city had been divided, yet the apparent opposition between the two sides had concealed the more fundamental similarities between them. East and West were more like two sides of the same coin, or Sides A and B of the same record. Both pursued similar aims, that of the unlimited expansion of industrial production, material needs, commodified relationships, and the bureaucratic and technological management of everyday life. But one side was to do so more successfully than the other.

The Wall finally collapsed not so much because the oppressive regime on the other side was about to disintegrate, but because that wall had long ceased to represent the boundary between the two main conflicting systems and ideologies of the contemporary era. That primary conflict was in fact to be found elsewhere, and now reveals itself ever more clearly. It is between the expansion of global markets, corporations, state bureaucracies, and techno-industrial systems on the one side, and on the other side the attempt to create and maintain autonomous spaces in which we are able to control and shape our own lives, cultures and communities.

We now need to build new kinds of walls that will represent the boundary between these two opposing projects. Walls of the kind that do not simply block out and negate, but which create a diversity of spaces in which truly *other* alternatives may flourish — other economies and ecologies, other forms of production and exchange, other ways of living, dwelling and imagining.

And what would these walls be made of? Perhaps some will be made of grape vines, climbing beans and fruit trees. Living, permeable walls that we can walk through and sit under, that nourish us, and that may shelter us from the endless flow of images, information, commodities and capital. Walls with doors in them, so that we can open our hearts to new possibilities for cooperation and a new ethic of frugality and constraint, while closing them to the excesses, the cruel ironies and the unspeakable horrors of the contemporary era. Walls that we can climb onto and stand upon, to enable us to see that there is *something more* that lies beyond in the distance, as well as to help us recognise and appreciate what is near to us. Walls that might make immune to the colonizers of the imagination.

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