11 No Future Here

Urbanization and Hope in Thailand

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Introduction: Futures Everywhere, Nowhere

Disembarking the packed Bangkok Skytrain at Ploenchit Station, I am met by a team of young people tromping through the sunbaked streets touting a new high-end condo named the *Aspire*. They hand me a flyer directing me to a website that promises that Aspire condos are "space[s] of pure joy" that will turn my "days of heat and pressure into relaxing calmness."[1] Further up the road and across a pedestrian bridge over a busy intersection, I encounter a massive advertisement for Krungsri Bank. Plastered to a wall surrounding a construction site—yet another condo development still to come—the sign depicts a suited man with his back to the camera, his arms are open wide, embracing whatever it is that is in front of him. Above it, a slogan reads "Aim high for a bigger and more vibrant future" (Figure 11.1). Neither the condos nor the futures promised by the bank are visible yet, but the cranes that dance behind the wall appear as potent forces seeking to make these possible futures real.

This dynamic is repeated again and again across Bangkok's Ratchaprasong district. Here, the future is everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. As Serhat Ünaldi has described, Ratchaprasong has become a critical site of contestation in early twenty-first century Thailand.[2] The area's luxury shopping malls and exclusive retail shops, Ünaldi argues, are sites where royal charisma is made real. The land is largely owned by the monarchy's purse, the Crown Properties Bureau, which exists to manage the properties belonging to the institution of the monarchy rather than the personage of the monarch. He points out that high-end commerce, real estate development, and mass consumer spectacle make privilege visible and power proximal. Because of this, the prominent intersection is also a site in which aspirations for political belonging have been vividly expressed. As Ünaldi describes, it was the scene of both mass protests during the 2010 Red Shirt occupations and micro-level subversions of anti-monarchy graffiti. It was also where state and non-state violence occurred in response to these forms of resistance. Ratchaprasong's contradictions thus suggest multiple struggles currently being waged over Thailand's future.

11.1 A bank advertisement encircles a construction site, blocking dust and selling futures.

Past the bank's advertisement lie unmistakable signs of this violent and volatile present: the Erawan shrine, bombed on August 17, 2016 just days before my walk, is surrounded by a visible military presence and a cadre of reporters beaming stories about the incident across the globe. The shrine was originally built on the recommendation of astrologers to counteract the ill-timed construction of the old government owned Erawan Hotel. Now, it sits adjacent to the Grand Hyatt Erawan and is a popular attraction in its own right. The statue of Brahma at its center draws both Thais and foreign devotees seeking to secure better futures by asking for good fortune, wealth, health, or lucky lotto numbers.[3] Anthropologist Charles Keyes has described the Brahman shrine as one of the most important non-Buddhist religious spaces in the city. He argues that previous vandalism of the shrine in 2006 was read as a bad omen for the popular, but controversial Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was removed from office by military putsch just six months after the incident.[4] The 2015 bombing and the subsequent investigations into southern Thai dissidents, disaffected Uighur migrants, and anti-government forces provoked similar astrological speculations about the tenuousness of the military's grip over the government.

The Central World Mall complex is just beyond the shrine. The mall was burned and rebuilt in the wake of the violent dispersal of the Red Shirt protest encampment in 2010. Months after that event, signs were plastered around the re-construction zone that sought to reassure passersby, reading "Everything is Going to be OK." Now, a giant, cartoonish purple pineapple wearing a top hat waves a peace sign at shoppers entering the building. Next to the mall lies the Buddhist temple complex of Wat Pathumwanaram where civilians sought refuge amidst mounting casualties and heavy fire during that same 2010 event. The encampment's dispersal resulted in the deaths of 91 unarmed civilians including six casualties inside the temple complex.

Still more signs of the future to come lie further down the road: across the street from the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, which became a stage for student protests in the weeks and months following the 2014 military coup, the famous, but aging, MBK shopping center is under renovation. The building is surrounded by fences and wrapped with signs. The three-meter-high letters of one sign beckon, "The future is now!" Below that are images of MBK's future form. A large window interrupts the building's metallic skin; inside giant green plants are visible, bringing nature into a scene of mass consumption.

This tension between the uncertain present and the cheerful future manifests itself again and again on the two-kilometer stretch of road: The violence and precarity of the last decade awkwardly collide with capitalist-assured futures that manifest in the form of new urban projects. These projects all but shout: "Ignore the violence, just keep shopping, the future will be okay." As the twentieth century drew to a close, Thailand was riding a wave of astounding economic growth and a dramatic democratic transformation that marked it as one of the brightest spots in Southeast Asia.

Rather differently, Thailand ushered in the twenty-first century on the back of an economic implosion which was followed by political upheaval, which gave way to catastrophic flooding, a brief return to democracy, a shallow economic recovery, and then a return to military government and deep economic stagnation.

The first decade of Thailand's new century seems defined as being post-everything: Thailand's days of booming economic growth ended in 1997. The country has struggled through periods of democracy and military rule since 2006, with the most recent coup indicating limited possibilities for a return to democracy. I do not mean to suggest that any of these processes (economic growth, democratization, or development) were ever completed or even that they ever reach completion in some kind of narrow, linear sense of arrival. Rather, *post*, here, refers to the way that each of these twentieth century narratives of linear temporal progress towards a defined state of development—economic and political—have been dramatically eroded if not abandoned in the last decade. Thailand's promised futures seem to have died while still being born.[5]

The present is grim. Yet, as I describe below, futuring itself has not been abandoned and not only by the construction and real estate industries. Still, the premature deaths of these global future-making projects (democracy and developmentalist modernity) have had profound impacts on the ways in which Thais conceptualize the future from their present condition. In this essay, I describe how two different sets of actors—avant-garde architects and provincial activists in poor urban settlements—mine the dark corners of this moment to generate alternative possibilities, mobilizing visions of the problematic and degraded city in the name of critique, politics, and a future otherwise. I argue that these other future-making projects not only help us better understand the production of hope in difficult times, but also offer insights into the ways which futures are being made across distinct social classes in twenty-first century Asia. I suggest that exploring the interfaces between built environments, lived experiences of the city, urban imaginaries of citizens, and sites of direct urban politics enables us to locate productive spaces of critical future-making. In these contentious middle grounds, it becomes possible to see precisely where old narratives of futurity are being unwound as new geographies of urban life of are being spun.

A Twisted Concrete Future

Thailand's future is a twisted concrete tower. It has no beginning and no end; it is a pale-red Mobius strip of vertical concrete that sits adjacent to a cheerful beachside promenade. This is the 10 Cal Tower.[6] Named for the amount of calories burned in the process of climbing it (10 calories), the structure is a vertical labyrinth that looks like a parking structure without cars. Designed by the architecture firm Supermachine on behalf of the Siam Cement Group, the tower stands as a subversive monument to the relationship between the city, critique, and the future.

Supermachine's Bangkok office is a bright pink brick house located in the city's suburbs. There, Pitupong "Jack" Chaowakul, the visionary behind the firm, explains the 10 Cal project to me in this way:

> Look at this thing [pointing to an image of the tower on his Macbook Air]. It is completely out of place. It looks tough and brutal. I think there is critique in there but it is under the surface. I think people lack the ability to criticize here. It limits our ability to think creatively, to speculate. That is why there is no future here. (Interview, August 11, 2015)

Earlier in our conversation Jack described how Japanese comics like Doremon, Goldranger, and Ultraman influenced him. "In Japan, which is where all this stuff [these comics] came from, they used to have this comic called Tsubasa [Captain Tsubasa]. This was in the 1980s when they had never qualified for a [football] World Cup. Tsuabsa is about how the Japanese team wins the World Cup. Now, like twenty years later, they are in the World Cup Finals like all the time. This never happens in Thailand. There is no critique, no exploration … here everyone thinks the same."

Here is where the 10 Cal Tower becomes interesting as an artifact of the future. Its built form becomes a kind of embodiment of the relationship between critique, pessimism, and hope. Following a "plug-in model", the tower seems plopped down from space offering a point to debate. The firm cleverly calls it an "adult playground", inviting parents into the scene of play with their children, but Jack's emphasis on critique indicates that the building does more than involve adults in the scene of play.

The pointless twisting structure, its invitation for purposeless exercise, and its roots in the historic company's anniversary are perhaps more subversive when read in light of Jack's sense of missing futures. In contrast to much of the futuring done by and through construction, the 10 Cal tower interrupts the present casting it back in a different light. If construction, real estate, and finance seem to have a monopoly on what and how we think of Asian futures, then the 10 Cal tower suggests that all of this building might be going nowhere.

What kind of future does the structure suggest? Instead of answering this question, the tower raises it in a way that follows the same looping path as its concrete form. It is a provocation that forces those who step into it to ask these questions themselves, one calorie at a time, over and over again. The tower's rendering of the present as a twisted concrete form does not offer a clear answer. Unlike the purposeful structures along Ratchaprasong, the tower assembles no bodies for a ready-made future of luxury, calmness, consumption, or relaxation. It does not make promises of a better life. Those who try to explore it go nowhere special, merely returning to the bottom only to reencounter themselves again as before. The tower does not rest in an optimistic space, but instead insists on returning to a question: Why does it exist at all? Might the same be asked of these other purposeful buildings? In this way, the 10 Cal Tower presents an awkward and ambivalent rendering of the future as rooted in a critical stance towards the present. The 10 Cal Tower takes up the means of urbanization and strips them of their pretenses of purposeful futurity. By rendering the structure narrativeless—except for the amount of calories burned in scaling it—the tower offers no easy answers for what lies ahead.

"The city and the sky are the same"

In 2009, in the middle of a particularly concentrated moment of Thailand's national political turmoil, Mae Horm and I sit in the United Communities network office in the provincial city of Khon Kaen discussing the problems she has encountered in her work trying to organize the railway squatter settlements where the office is located. Out the window, sparks cascade from the top of what was, at the time of this interview, the city's newest project, Central Plaza Khon Kaen. High atop the building's hulking rear façade welders bring the massive new "lifestyle" complex to life. Flickering bits of glowing metal seem to rain down on the humble shacks behind.

She begins:

> The biggest problem is that the government doesn't know how people live in the communities. The villagers have many weaknesses. They think of themselves. They argue. They have bad leaders (or no leaders). They don't work together. This is true, but it is a result of the fact that they don't have any rights and they don't have enough to eat or secure lives (*chiwit mai mankong*). The government doesn't

see this. They just see villagers fighting … but this is the story of the entire government."

Why is this? It is because everyone only thinks of themselves. Right now people's heads are in the sky. They think about planes and telephones and cars and televisions and satellites, but they have forgotten to live with nature.

In the past you would wake up and the sky was clear. There were people out with their buffalos working the fields. They grew food: fish, rice, vegetables. They ate fish when the fish were ready in the rice fields and then when the chickens were ready they would eat the chickens.

You walked around and everyone invited you to eat with them (*ma gin khao*) or asked where you were going (*pai nai ma*) and how your day was (*pen yangay bang*). If you didn't have something people would share with you or they would exchange something.

This was the real way of life (*witichiwit thae jing*) before all of this stuff came from elsewhere, all of this technology. Now technology has come in and—boop!—everything is faster and the world is hotter. We used to have mechanical watches and now watches have batteries. If you drop the battery in the ground, an area of about a square meter will be dead around it. You won't be able to grow anything there.

Did you see the sky when we drove into Bangkok? I couldn't believe it! It was like the earth had risen to the sky and the sky had fallen to the earth. When we were kids the sky was clear and the sun would rise yellow and set red. Now people just think about TVs, telephones, and computers and they can't relate to each other anymore. The city and the sky are the same.

It's like with the Thaksin government, they did a lot of good but ultimately their downfall was a story of power. He just thought of himself first and even though he had many good ideas and good policies he always fed himself first and this was the main problem. So there is corruption at the top and corruption at the bottom. People have forgotten the way the world should work. (Interview, February 18, 2009)

Narratives like this, of venal politicians, a spoiled planet, and the city as a degraded environmental and social space, are a common part of everyday conversations among Thai activists and community leaders like Mae Horm. She begins typically, discussing why local efforts at organizing residents along the tracks have failed when she abruptly shifts registers and scales, discussing how humans and technology have merged, social community has dissolved, and, that "the city and the sky are the same." According to her, this almost metaphysical socio-technical convergence resulted in a transformed environment that grew out of and produced new affective relationships among people.

Yet, this narrative is not deployed nihilistically. Instead, she pairs it with projects in lived space and present time. Sometimes these narratives of the degraded city foster participation in new forms of urban planning or other development initiatives aimed at generating local connections. Other times, such renderings of the city have promoted calls to direct politics that have mobilized residents to challenge the railway's authority over the land they live on but it claims to own. Stories like this have also grown out of disagreements and collaborations between NGO activists and residents of neighboring communities who sometimes cooperate and sometimes obstruct one another in their struggles for space in the city. These narratives have also provoked collaborations and resistance with state development experts who seek to improve and govern these settlements through collective projects. Sometimes, they do not dovetail with local politics at all but instead evoke broader concerns about the nation's trajectory, drawing the malformed shape of its political sphere into relief against this rapidly transforming environment. Some of these stories pushed provincial citizens into the capital to make bolder public claims to political belonging through mass protests like those that took place in 2010.

As Paw Nokhuk, another community leader in Khon Kaen with connections to the politically organized Four Region's Slum Network described it:

> This city [Khon Kaen] is changing so much. If I had the chance I would go move to Lao. There are not so many people there. Just four million in the whole country. It will never be like this. Khon Kaen is growing with the new railroad projects and Central [the new shopping mall]. We are lucky because our community is getting more stable with its land rights, but things will change. As the city grows things will get more expensive. Do you know how much it

> costs to get a place in Bangkok now? There are condos there that cost 4,000,000 THB [120,000 USD]. For that price you just get rights to your room! You don't get any land or anything. You are up there on the twenty-seventh floor, but you have no rights on the ground! You just have rights to be up there in the atmosphere. We have rights here on the ground, but we'll need to continue to work together if we want to keep them. (Field notes, August 25, 2010)

This atmospheric rendering of the future is grounded directly in the present-tense struggle for land rights taking place along the tracks. Paw Nokhuk's organizing with NGO activists has had important effects on the ground, altering the sense of citizenship for him and his neighbors living along the tracks and transforming their visions of what this space, often derided as a slum, might become. Here, the dark form of a city rapidly assembling itself looms in the background, driving difficult, risky, and contentious political projects forward. Blackened canals, predatory capitalism, condos in the clouds, and degraded forms of sociality move these activists towards the acrimonious debates and agonistic politics necessary to secure their space in the city.

In this sense, these narratives of improvement are not only myths to govern by, but also reflexive engagements with the present and critical engagements with the future. They offer a means of describing life as it is, as it feels, and acting towards life otherwise. Although narratives like these call upon circulating, but distinctly mobilized, visions of a nostalgic past, they are also grounded in the sensory experiences of a present defined by rapidly changing spatial relations, crumbling political systems, expanding urban landscapes, incomplete and uneven infrastructures, and massive environmental shifts that far exceed the Thai state's borders. These shifts—local, national, and global—are neither isolated from one another nor merely imagined, but deeply interrelated and felt as successive governments (even rival governments) have expanded infrastructural plans along the tracks that threaten residents' homes, do little to curb badly planned growth, and facilitate further urban transformation.

The sensory description of the ruined, warming city is powerful because of its ability to transform uncertain encounters with this urbanizing landscape and an anxious present into a source of action. Dark visions of the present, like Mae Horm's and Paw Nokhuk's, are paired with a set of critical observations about how things could be different and tentative but persistent actions aimed at making the future better.[7] These actions move towards a more clearly defined vision of a more just city, even if those clear visions become entangled in action, not unlike the 10 Cal Tower.

In this way, the sensory experience of the degraded urban is, what Thrift calls, a "spatiality of feeling", can be powerful in producing situated projects in the name of other possible futures.[8] Lacking sites to ground critique or a means to produce a different future, such descriptions of urban trouble can do little more than help people make sense of rapid urbanization out of their control. Yet, for the activists I have been working with in Khon Kaen, these dark urban descriptions drive action on the ground. They push local organizers to struggle with the city and the state, homeowners to reconstruct their homes, educated architects to work with the poor, concerned residents to argue with their neighbors, and everyone to imagine life otherwise.[9] Through action they transform the grim urban present into a possible city of the future, even if such a thing provokes yet new terrains of difficult and improbable struggle.

Hope in Bleak Times

These grim readings of Thailand's urban present have two implications for how we think about hope and urban futures in Asia and beyond. Anthropologist Hirokazu Miyazaki ties the problem of hope to a relation between temporality and agency.[10] In the case of the temporality, Miyazaki argues that hope emerges out the indeterminacy of the present. With regards to agency, he draws from the philosopher Richard Rorty to argue that pragmatist notions of hope relocate salvation from the realm of God to the realm of man. Miyazaki argues that this notion of hope "invokes the limits of the retrospection of contemplation and serves as a method for philosophy that is open to the future." Hope, then, is a method that emerges "as sparks on another terrain."[11]

In this sense hope is not a blind optimism that things will get better but a complex way of apprehending the present world and producing knowledge about it that makes futures possible. As Lorena Gibson puts it, hope is "a way of engaging in the present with a world that is not yet here."[12] Such a rendering of hope accounts for what one encounters in the present but necessarily leads actors into an unknown space that might be different. Hope transforms the given into something otherwise.

The 10 Cal Tower shows us how urban construction sits at a kind of fuzzy boundary here. Construction makes new ways of living possible but confines future possibilities by consigning them to the present order. This is why construction projects seek to soothe, promising that the forces ordering the present will persist; the expertise of architecture, engineering, and design will channel uncertainty, making the future known and knowable, better than the present. These urban forces tell us everything will be okay. The 10 Cal tower offers no such calmatives. Instead, the tower manifests the present to provoke alternatives. Similarly, the activists I describe above take present tense gloominess and twist it, wringing action into being. These cases tell us that what is necessary to mobilize a future is both a critical stance on the present and a will to work towards something otherwise. Such a stance refigures the present, makes it strange, and thus produces the conditions of possibility for something else.

Futures scholarship is embedded in Miyazaki's "method of hope". By engaging closely with the present set of facts, representing them as one possibility among many, we do not necessarily produce a new future, but we engage hope as a method in order that different futures might be possible. My informants, realists that they are, demonstrate that the method of hope is linked to an unflinching willingness to work across multiple temporal plains, projecting things as they are and as they might be in multiple directions in the name of making; in doing so they aim to transform decline into politics. This practice might be thought of as a kind of "critical futuring."

The critical readings of urban decline that I describe above call on imaginaries that grow out of emerging urban life to enact new futures in space and time. David Harvey refers to this as a kind of "dialectical utopianism," which roots utopian projects in the present.[13] Such a thing is not the task of thought alone but also accomplished through the work of the outward turning of bodies. Mae Horm and Paw Nokhuk tie their weary and complex feelings about the city and the nation to tentative, pragmatic, contradictory, and often divisive modes of engaging with others that seek to transform present conditions grounded in space in the name of future possibilities. These are often incipient political forms that, like the 10 Cal tower, take urban modernity and twist it back on itself to estrange the present, casting possibilities for new future forms.

Our efforts to understand Asian futures, like efforts to understand futures elsewhere, should be rooted in these dialectics on the ground. Attending to urban futures at this level is an urgent project for Asia and for global urban theory more broadly, representing the temporal side of Ananya Roy's call for "new geographies of theory."[14] Such a project is necessary for both coming to terms with the sites in which contemporary urbanization is taking place most rapidly and for formulating a future-oriented theory capable of dealing with the complexities of the dark and uncertain collision of planetary urbanization and planetary environmental change.[15] The production of a new temporality of urban theory requires closely attending to the way urban actors construct alternative trajectories on the ground as they encounter urban life in the present and rework it for the future. Whether their visions come to pass as social movements, built forms, or political projects is not as important as giving those critical life-projects space to speak for themselves.

As I have shown here, Thailand's urbanites produce futures through their daily actions, reading the city through their senses, sometimes acting together to produce alternatives. They do not interpret urban life optimistically, but muscle the city into a new form through contentious political labor. Such work connects circuits of critique to situated politics. When these connections occur, new visions of lives lived otherwise become possible, hope can become political action. This is a long way from the starry-eyed developmental optimism of Bangkok's condos. This version of hope is, instead, rooted in a dusty present-tense engagement that abuts pessimism and cynicism, but does not completely give way to either. These are the forces that make the world on a micro-level and are also the sites in which a new time for urban theory might be generated.

These futures enact themselves in a distinct temporal rhythm from construction and real estate capital and, in fact, are usually are obliterated by those fast-moving forces. Hope of this order does not quickly assemble itself at the speed of capital. Such critical Asian urbanisms stumble across uncertain trajectories, forming themselves as they go, bringing a new world into being one oddly matched brick at a time. In some sense, the disjuncture between the speed of capitalist optimism and the slowness of these critical urban futures can result in the absolute desiccation of the latter by the former. Many times these slow, critical projects disassemble themselves before they even get started. Yet, as their discontinuous trajectories stutter their way onwards, this mode of hope assembles people in the aim of making something new, unprecedented, creating spaces and times for the next set of sparks to alight. Short lived as they are likely to be, these are the sorts of social forces that transform a smoggy skyline, fetid canal water, specters of dispossession, fallow earth and a corrosive battery, or a twisted concrete tower into the stuff of alternatives, hope, politics.

Notes

1 "Aspire Ratchada Wongsawang," *AP Thai* December 2016. http://www.apthai.com/en/condo/aspire/aspire-ratchada-wongsawang/ (last accessed 6 September 2016).

2 Serhat Ünaldi, "Working towards the Monarchy and its Discontents: Anti-royal Graffiti in Downtown Bangkok" *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, 3 (2014) 377–443.

3 Marc Askew, "Materializing Merit: The Symbolic Economy of religious monuments and tourist-pilgrimage in contemporary Thailand" *Religious Commodification in Asia: Marketing Gods*, ed. P. Kitiarsa (London: Routledge, 2003) 89–119.

4 Charles Keyes, "The Destruction of a Shrine to Brahma in Bangkok and the Fall of Thaksin Shinawatra: The Occult and the Thai Coup in Thailand of September 2006" *ARI Working Paper Series* No. 80 (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, 2006).

5 This is a reference to Gramsci's notion of the interregnum, which I use not only to suggest Thailand's metaphorical position betwixt and between, but also to refer to the actual political context in which a tense uncertainty surrounds the role of the monarchy and the broader arrangement of the state. Taken further, this analysis suggests a broad social condition in which late-capitalism seems to be running its destructive course, but nothing else has arisen to take its place. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 276. Also, Zygmunt Bauman, "Times of Interregnum" *Ethics & Global Politics* 5, 1 (2012) 49–56.

6 pitupong, "The Labyrinth; 10 Cal Tower," *Supermachine Studio* (Bangkok) 2 February 2015. https://supermachine.co/2015/02/02/the-labyrinth-10-cal-tower-complete-images/.

7 This is not the first writing to observe the way pessimism grafts itself onto the figure of the urban. See, Robert B. Textor, "Cultural Futures for Thailand: An Ethnographic Enquiry" *Futures* 10, 5(1978) 347–60 and Robert B. Textor, "The Ethnographic Futures Research Method: An Application to Thailand" *Futures* 27, 4 (1995) 461–71. See also Andrew Alan Johnson, *Ghosts of the New City: Spirits, Urbanity, and the Ruins of Progress in Chiang Mai* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014).

8 Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008).

9 For example, Eli Elinoff, "A House is More than a House: Aesthetic Politics in a Northeastern Thai Railway Settlement" *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22, 3 (2016) 620–32.

10 Hirokazu Miyazaki, *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004).

11 Ibid, 24.

12 Lorena Gibson, *Hope, Agency, and the 'Side Effects' of Development in India and Papua New Guinea* (PhD Thesis, Massey University, 2011).

13 David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2000).

14 Ananya Roy, "The 21st-Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory" Regional Studies 43, 6 (2009) 819–30.

15 Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, "Planetary Urbanisation" *Urban Constellations*, ed. Matthew Gandy (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2011) 10–3.