9 Conclusion

Repeat that, repeat, 
Cuckoo, bird, and open ear wells, heart-springs, delightfully sweet, 
With a ballad, with a ballad, a rebound 
Off trundled timber and scoops of the hillside ground, hollow hollow hollow ground: 
The whole landscape flushes on a sudden at a sound.

Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The subject of the research reported in this thesis is the movement of movements as it developed in the 1990s. In the preceding chapters I have set out particulars of the make-up of the movement and how it functions. I have also shown how the movement was shaped by events, especially in the preceding thirty years of political action and thought.

One of those events occurred in the late sixties. It was the break-out from Western communist and socialist party structures by autonomists who wished to live without pacts binding them to capitalist bosses. Another key event was the survival and renewal of a subculture that kept up anarchist practices and thinking, across a far-flung network of collectives. A third event was the push by first nations peoples in settler states for recognition in law of the survival of their customary practices, including their particular modes of adapting to change. The push sought to remove a three hundred years old cultural bias from constitutionalist doctrine – and it met with some success. A fourth precursor event to the movement was the thinking of a polity in terms of the conflict that arises within it if its constituents are free to explore the polity’s becoming. In such a polity, the particular empties out (or fills out) the universal. Difference is seen with an eye to reciprocity, not with an eye to settling on some pact in which sameness – a common denominator – would prevail. The polity and its parts are engulfed in the struggle, or agon, of the shattered ‘I’ as it becomes the decentred ‘I’. Where a state fosters that practice of struggle, one has agonistic democracy.

This closing chapter reprises how those events came together in the movement of movements, giving the movement its character.

9.1 Miraculating grids, and machines in the socialisation of desire

In thinking about questions of power, I use the array of concepts that give rise to micropolitics. Chapters two and three of the thesis present those concepts, drawing on the work of the concepts’ originators, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.
The concepts are such that each train of thought and action they inform, adapts or inflects the concepts as the thought and action proceed. The concepts are a living web or rhizome, and they impart that rhizomic quality to the living tissue that figures in them. There is a knack to working with such concepts. One has to connect with the concepts while moving. Chapters two and three show how the concepts and the present writer connect. The two chapters establish that inquiring into the movement of movements has initiated me into working with concepts that suit the way the movement coheres. The chapters are part of the opening out of the concepts to a wider range of users.

Active parts, non-totalising wholes

Chapter two explores the theme that parts do not belong in totalising wholes, revealing the gist of the politics that takes up that theme.

In brief, the chapter affirms that there is no divine or natural law, which would strictly oblige wholes’ participating segments to be assembled in standard order. Going a stage further, it applauds Deleuze and Guattari for suggesting that no such law is to be found in the sciences, nor in semiology, nor in the arts. A whole is always less than totally together, always labile, never a self-same thing. Parts actively comprise wholes: they comprise some or other whole as and when the parts’ make-up (not the make-up of their current whole) dictates that pattern. That applies at all levels of disaggregation.

The parts’ make-up – what they are when and where their unified whole is in abeyance – has the stamp of a qualitative multiplicity. That is the kind of multiplicity that dips into the plasm of unities yet to be expressed (virtual unity). It is the kind of multiplicity, too, that maps of potential unity traverse, crisscrossing each other. Those disparate maps and the plasmatic virtual unity rival one another in the multiplicity. And they rival whatever ‘makes the cut’ of a unity that actually prevails, for the time being, in the whole.

From that starting point, it is possible to speak of the conditions under which parts happen to submit (or not) to being designated and performing as segments in some unified whole. Where there is such submitting, it is innately provisional, since forces acting from within and/or outside the whole may eventually cause a break, a crack, or a rupture. The ad hoc nature of a unified whole is an effect of constituent power, which never fully cedes its ground to constituted power.

Considering groups or classes of things as whole groups or classes, there is an inbuilt tendency in language to speak of them as though they were unified wholes. For instance, to speak of women is to hold in abeyance all that makes women differ from one another; and likewise, it holds in abeyance all that makes a particular woman prone to alter as she moves from one situation or mood to another. The same goes for naming any group or class at all. The name screens out the group’s presence as a qualitative multiplicity, hiding it with the fiction of a quantitative multiplicity (women, men, loaves and fishes, widgets). The fiction shores up subjugated groups: that is the kind of group in which the addition of members does not make the group different from when it was smaller. Add any newly encountered
woman to the group ‘women’, and you get a larger group of women, all of whom are still the
women they were before. Remove an individual woman from the group ‘women’, and the
group’s remaining members are still the women they were before.

The alternative to a subjugated group is a subject-group, which continues to become
different from itself as new members are added or removed. A subject-group is primed to
explore its multiple personae, its qualitative multiplicity, its ambiguous-whole-ness and its
ambiguous wholeness. One sign of a subject-group is that the group’s ethos lies not in what
it means to belong and not-belong, but in the group’s manner of exploring its future
becomings.

Society as a programmable machine

The theme of parts never belonging in totalised wholes is a prelude to the concept of
miraculating grids, such that tracts of body tissue may be lifted off one of the grids and fall
onto a new one. Sometimes that switch from old organ-isation of body tissue to new happens
en masse in a society, as a tide of similar re-grids engulfs individual bodies. It is then said (in
the language of micropolitics) that there has been a shift from one social machine to another.

In computer parlance, the re-grid of body tissue en masse is a reboot of a programmable
or ‘universal’ machine. The machine has a memory unit (a data storage unit) called a socius,
which is a virtual surface – it is not a simple planar surface, but a manifold.

I bring in the computer terms advisedly. There is a strong parallel between the socius’s
pairing capability and that of a computer’s memory unit. The virtual surface is capable of
pairing up with different actual surfaces, to form in each instance an actualised socius. That
open pairing capability exists also in the memory unit of a computer, a unit which is capable
of pairing up with any item of software, drawn at will from all the software that can
conceivably be written to run tasks on the computer. (That explains why computers, before
they were invented and in their early years, were known as programmable computers, or
universal machines. They were defined by what they were not, viz that they were not, say,
adding machines – that they were machines and yet they were not purpose-built for use as
this or that. They showed, if you like, that a machine need have no telos.)

Imagine the programmable machine comprised of the socius and the notional
counterparts of a CPU and input and output devices. That programmable machine is virtual
society. A kindred way of envisaging virtual society is to think of it as the amorphous
progenitor of machine platforms for all conceivable ‘Sim City’ style games, except that in
this case, the game-worlds are the actual world. When virtual society (the programmable
machine) gives rise to an actual machine platform, with a programme loaded in the socius
and the machine executing the programme, the ensemble is known as a social machine. In
sum, a social machine is an actual society spoken of as a machine.
‘Universal’ history

Here is a tall tale, about the entanglement of social machines with ‘universal’ history. (The tall tale does no harm, and it is a pleasant tweaking of the true story, which receives its proper telling in chapter three.) Imagine Deleuze and Guattari, in the early 1970s, creating the concept of society as the work of a programmable or universal machine. They have looked at society; they have done some thinking; and they see society as a rebootable, code-harbouring assemblage. Perhaps they think this concept of society is too far ahead of its time, and they wish to smooth off the concept’s futuristic edge. In any event, they choose to connect their new concept with a quaint and Eurocentric discourse of world history, which was taken seriously for about a century in the wake of the European Enlightenment. For Britain, it was also the century of glorying in her far-flung empire. The quaint discourse went into decline early in the twentieth century; since then, however, it has been a long time dying.

The quaint discourse polarises on three constructs. The first pole is the ancient East, the past incubator of certain practices for the marshalling of labour, practices destined to have their true potential realised by Europe. The second pole is Europe. Discoverer, architect, engineer and entrepreneur to the world, Europe is proudly more than a world unto herself. The third pole is the New World, where land and biota alike form a vast extraction and construction site, for use by Europe.

For each pole, say Deleuze and Guattari, there is a social machine, which accounts for the pole’s existence and its place in the schema of the history. They describe the software of the social machine in each case. Corresponding to the first pole is social machine two, which is society as it functioned in the empires of the ancient East. Corresponding to the second pole is social machine three, which is society as it has functioned in Europe since the arrival of capitalism. Corresponding to the third pole is social machine one, which is society as it functioned in what was to become the New World, during the time preceding the arrival there of Europeans. (More broadly, social machine one is society as it functioned everywhere on earth before the writing and booting of the software for either social machine two or social machine three.) Both social machines two and one are in retreat – or so it would seem – as social machine three spreads itself out.

The table on the facing page shows the schema linking the three social machines to the poles in the quaint discourse of world history; it also shows the descriptive labels given to the social machines by Deleuze and Guattari.

The difference in the numbering on the left- and right-hand sides of the table is telling. It suggests that the concept of social machines has potential to take hold in the Eurocentric discourse of world history, and exert a torque.
The discourse of Empire, opened at the turn of the century by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, does not seize the opportunity of exerting such a torque. Hardt and Negri extend the discourse of world history by adding another construct to it: pole four, Empire. In their writings on the society of Empire, however, they have not couched the description of the society in terms of the software in some fourth social machine.

My approach to the exerting of torque, making use of the above schema, runs as follows. One can view the movement of movements as the early stages of the making of a revisionist history of the encounter between social machines three and one. In the revisionist history, social machine one does not get supplanted by social machine three; instead, the encounter between social machines one and three is a catalyst for social machine three to reinvent (patch and reboot) itself.

Hardt and Negri depict the movement of movements – or the part of it that they write about – as a push for absolute democracy. In support of my view that social machine three is reinventing itself and not simply starting to be supplanted by Empire, the thesis argues that there is more to the movement of movements than a push for absolute democracy.

### 9.2 Forthright constituent power, absolute democracy

#### Theory of absolute democracy

Absolute democracy stems from the principle that right is coextensive with power, which forms part of the philosophy of Spinoza. According to that principle, if a body or any part of society (an estate) is capable of self-rule, it has a right to self-rule. The watchword is, ‘If you can, you may’ (which is often paraphrased, erroneously, as ‘Might is right’).
Contrary to Hobbes, Spinoza argues that it is never wise for a body or an estate that is capable of self-rule to abrogate that right. A body or an estate that abrogates self-rule and places itself under the rule of a constituted power, is separating itself from what it can do. In the same vein, a body or an estate that cedes its right to take part directly in decisions affecting it, by having representatives take on that role, is separating itself from what it can do. It may adopt such a course because it is under duress, or because there is some freely negotiated exchange (a social contract, conferring a benefit in exchange for the ceded rights). In either case, the quality of the use of power is poor. The abrogation involves repressive force – by definition, repressive force is force that separates a body from what it can do.

It would be better, in the view of Spinoza, to take the path of higher fulfilment in the use of power, which is the path that connects the body or estate with what it can do, namely, rule itself. That path leads to the form of government where the organ that presides over the use of power is an assembly of all those who exercise the power that must be ruled. A body or estate that puts into effect its constituent power has no use for constituted power (sovereign power). ‘The model of this constitution,’ Say Hardt and Negri,

is a general assembly of forces, an absolute and equal inclusion of the entire immanent social plane: democracy, as Spinoza is fond of saying, is the absolute form of government.\(^1\)

It hardly needs saying that absolute democracy is a form of rule that requires effort on the part of constituents. Quite apart from that cost overhead (paid in kind), the result produced may be less than ideal. Absolute democracy is premised on starting out with the kind of society where power is not concentrated in the hands of the few. Each estate, or each person, that thinks itself capable of self-rule, needs to have not just the self-belief, but also the might to overcome whatever forces are working against its attaining self-rule. ‘Might’ in this context is some combination of sheer will, brawn, and economic, affective, and intellectual firepower. In a situation where that exacting condition is met, absolute democracy produces rule by the people. Rule by the people differs sharply from the kind of democracy that rests on a legitimising of rule by dint of its being exercised (so it is said) with the consent of the people, as in representative democracy.

For anyone who is convinced that rule by the people is worth aiming for, other forms of democracy are, at best, stop-gap measures. At worst, the other forms are traps, in which the people fall prey to repressive forces, so that the prospect of rule by the people shrinks to a speck in the far distance.

Needless to say, rule by the people differs from directed democracy, in which a leader or a politburo holds sway, and claims to be the people’s champion and defender. Further, rule by the people differs from pragmatic relativist liberal democracy, the kind of democracy that comes with wise and pragmatic insiders who pull the strings in the game of politics. (In the pragmatic insider’s kit, there are scientific experts; there are firms that supply marketing and

\(^1\) (Hardt and Negri, 1994: p 290).
issues management services, using focus group and other canvassing techniques; there are fix-it and spin merchants at work round the clock; and there are organs that channel both open and covert infomercials, to sell people on what the state is up to, or rather, to sell them on what it wants them to think it is up to.) In both directed and pragmatic relativist liberal democracy, state power is wielded, at best, in the interests of the people. (People may consent in pragmatic relativist liberal democracy, but the consent is a spoilt good, so sullied is it by the base scheming and disrespect that went into the securing of it.)

**Absolute democracy in practice**

Absolute democracy is rarely encountered in practice. As noted above, it requires quite an effort from constituents; and it cannot be relied on to produce rule by the people, unless some way is found to start with a society where power is widely dispersed. If a society abounds in subjugated groups, it will make a poor incubator for absolute democracy. The existing power relations will hamper subalterns from attaining the self-rule that many or all of them may believe to be their right. In such cases, absolute democracy may be honoured in the letter, but as long as those in subaltern positions do not have self-rule, it is too big a stretch to say that rule by the people prevails.

A case in point is the form of rule that the settler colony of Rhode Island adopted, without seeking royal permission, in 1641. The puritan colony was established on land purchased from the traditional owners. Under the chosen form of rule, its laws were made by the decisions of the assembled free citizens. The assembly delegated ministers to carry out the decisions, and the lawmakers kept a close watch over the delegates’ work. Rhode Island’s form of rule was an instance of absolute democracy, practised in advance of the theory being set down by Spinoza. Looking back at the polity from our standpoint some three centuries later, the obvious comment is that subaltern types, notably women, were barred from participation in self-rule. At the time, the subaltern types, for want of the requisite power base under the system of absolute democracy, would probably not have won the right to engage in self-rule had they campaigned for it (assuming they had been so minded).

Absolute democracy in practice can bring rule by the people, even though that is not a guaranteed result. Proof that it can happen comes from two regions of Mexico, where bands of first nations people have practised absolute democracy. The first instance occurred in the state of Morelos during the Mexican revolution of 1910-1920. A force of armed first nations subsistence farmers formed around the figure of one of their number, named Emiliano Zapata. The smallholder-based irregulars were in contact with the anarcho-syndicalist movement, which by that time had spread abroad from France. They adopted a practice of making decisions for themselves, in meetings that were open to all comers. No one held political office. They carried out a program of agrarian reform, breaking up large estates and redistributing the land; they neither needed nor did they wish the state to be involved in the reform program. For six years, they secured their own freedom from constituted power and
secured their livelihood, despite efforts by the authorities and the estate bosses to bring them undone.

There was ongoing civil unrest in various parts of Mexico, and a constitution adopted in 1917 made the president a dictator. It also vested the state with powers to confiscate and redistribute land, though a reformist president who would use those powers was another seventeen years coming. By then, the Morelos episode of self-rule by constituent power had become a memory.

The memory retained enough power to combine with other forces toward the end of the century, producing a resurgence of self-rule by constituent power. As part of the wider pattern of world affairs in the eighties and nineties, the state of Mexico was working with the global external investor cartel (the International Monetary Fund). The government was giving the country a dose of restructuring, in the neoliberal manner. The restructuring program squeezed the poor, and it let large corporations tighten their grip on the economy. In the state of Chiapas, there was a loose-knit peasant-worker alliance, which had a history, going back thirty years, of using direct action to secure smallholders’ and workers’ rights. The people who made up the alliance were accustomed to self-providing for their economic and social needs. When their self-providing came under direct threat from the restructuring program, the people prepared for an uprising. They had formed in 1983 their own security force made up of irregulars, the EZLN or Zapatista Army of National Liberation, and it now shifted into covert mode. In January 1994, the EZLN secured for the alliance seven towns and surrounding lands, which have since then kept to a set of practices producing rule by the people, or absolute democracy.

A clever strategy for securing Zapatista lands has been crucial to the EZLN’s success. Not long after liberating the seven towns, the EZLN unilaterally laid down its arms. It was able to do that because it was in contact with many sympathisers outside Mexico. It had invited international observers to come and witness, and to publicise globally, the acts that the state may take to put down the insurgency. That the EZLN moved to tap into a large group of sympathisers shows that it saw how to bend the technologies that were shrinking the globe, bend them to serve in its cause. One relevant factor was the EZLN’s having in its ranks a student (and former teacher) of philosophy, who goes by the alias Subcomandante Marcos. The EZLN was able to build on the Subcomandante’s active connections to student, anarchist and autonomist groups around the world. The EZLN’s awareness of the long-running peace camps that defied the authorities in the Thatcher-Reagan era also stood the EZLN in good stead.

The EZLN played host to foreign volunteer workers and irregulars from 1995 on. In August 1996 hundreds of foreign guests and locals took part in the First Intercontinental Encuentro, which was held in the Lacandón jungle, Chiapas. The meeting made a strong impression on many of the anarchists and autonomists taking part, and it gave them hands-on training in Zapatista practices so that they would be able to use them in other contexts.

Following the Second Intercontinental, which took place in Spain in 1997, the network known as People’s Global Action (PGA) formed. PGA hit upon the practice of calling a
globally synchronised ‘day of action,’ to bring about a highly visible (telegenic) confluence of active force, which could be repeated at call. The first global day of action was in May 1998, the second in June 1999, and the third in November 1999 (the famous convergence on Seattle was part of the third global day of action). On average, during the next four years, there were two to three global days of action each year, with each one focussed on a regional or global summit meeting of business and/or government.

There has been a seeding of Zapatista practices outside Chiapas from 1996 on, in temporary zones both local and global. But care is needed in divining a message from that success. Zapatistas, both as individuals and as collectives, have no wish to be – and besides, they cannot be – a vanguard for any unifying project of, or project for, the people. A Zapatista conscience tells its owner to become that which it is, in the words of Nietzsche’s aphorism. The openness to becoming is at odds with stoking the fires of identity, and unifying projects are therefore anathema to it. Zapatista practices make all groups speak as minorities, or bearers of quirks, holding that there is no such thing as regular membership in society. (The idea is to undermine the special standing that confers on some persons and not others the right to disavow their specialness, viz the specialness of being not-a-‘minority.’)

Another way of putting the last point is to say that where Zapatista practices of self-rule prevail, and people form into groups, they form into subject-groups, not subjugated groups. Any subject-group is a qualitative multiplicity, and hence it cannot be crisply named – call that the *je ne sais quoi* of absolute democracy.

### 9.3 Perhaps constituent power, agonistic democracy

#### Agonistic democracy in practice

It would seem that the rhizomic body of people who practised self-rule in Chiapas started something; but what it started (what will become of it) remains to be seen.

As its security strategy from 1993 on, the rhizomic body was reaching out to cells at a distance, with the idea of having them take on a watching and publicity role. By 1997, the year of the Second Intercontinental, the rhizomic body was reaching out to cells of various kinds, not all of them anarchist or autonomist. Some were people working to keep alive hunter-gatherer traditions; some were smallholders or landless rural workers; and some came from cities that had been formed by escaped slaves in Latin America. Few, if any, of those cells-at-a-distance were adept in anarchist or autonomist practices.

The rhizomic body melding with its cells-at-a-distance knew that to meld with them was to explore its own becoming; the process was not one of growing a known anarcho-syndicalist body. Thus, the rhizomic body was coming together with its newer cells as an experiment. The aim was to see where the practices involved in reaching individual and
collective decisions under self-rule, and in executing such decisions without using repressive force, might lead.

From mid 1999 on, the cells-at-a-distance taking part in global days of action became yet more diverse and more numerous. The rhizomic body came of age as of that year, in that its parts’ unsmothered differences, producing its polysemic character, were in plain view. Chiapas and its Zapatistas had taken another step in becoming what they are. No longer were they a growing movement’s prime point of gravitation – something they never in truth had been, though they had seemed to start in that role. They were a singularity (haecceitas) to be found in a serial meeting of singularities.

Already, something else was to be found in that serial meeting. Among the cells and individuals taking part in the global days of action, and pursuing local actions in the intervening periods, a good few were not forthright supporters of rule by the people: they were people who passed as its supporters though they actually did not support it. In other words, by no means all comers had written off the constitutionalist state and were prepared to come out and say so; and it follows that, in the movement, there was a degree of ambivalence toward absolute democracy.

For instance, the people who were acting in defence of their traditional societies, cultures and local economies in some cases looked to the constitutionalist state as a protector of their rights. It is clear from the work of Tully, Patton and other scholars that people pursuing that agenda in the nineties invoked in a positive way the constitutionalist state. The monist or unifying view of reality and history and justice was being challenged. Fewer people by the day were prepared to put up with the harm and pain that the monist view produced: the lack of positive human connection, the failed mediation, and the inequality of outcomes. Increasingly, a pluralist approach to communicating about the real and to evaluating the good was seen as both worthy in itself and conducive to peace. The mood had no overt connection with anarchist thought, nor with autonomist thought, nor with Spinoza’s concept of a society of constituent power. It had to do with renewal in the constitutionalist state.

Theory of agonistic democracy

As noted above, there was not a single crisp stance vis a vis absolute democracy in the movement of movements during the nineties; there was a degree of ambivalence. So, one cannot treat the movement as a pure expression of constituent power. There were many different currents embraced in it, and furthermore, there was an openness to encounters that could enlist new currents. Establishing a way of life that would go on without any interference from the state was not at the forefront of many participants’ thought and action. Nor was doing away with the state tout a fait. Re-founding the state, placing demands on the state, providing input to consultations conducted by the state – these things were at the forefront, for many participants much of the time. Putting an end to the state qua state, and replacing it with rule by the people, was not a universally supported project within the movement, though it did have some support.
There is a theory of democracy that suits the movement of movements, considered as a push to form a non-unified polity. It is a theory of conflicted-self-rule, which is two things in one: self-rule of a conflicted kind, and rule by a conflicted-self. The conflict is crucial; hence conflicted-self-rule is better described as a practice than as a form of rule. The practice has been known since the mid 1980s as agonistic democracy, the name used by its leading theorists, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. (William E Connolly sets forth a theory of democratic pluralisation, which is close to agonistic democracy. Connolly’s theory calls for citizens to practise agonistic respect for each other; in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory, bouts of conflict within the polity are an adjunct to freedom.)

Agonistic democracy, in brief, is a practice by which a polity forms and, in the same stroke, opens itself to transformation. The practice is brought about through institutions of state, which are themselves adaptive outcomes of the transformative practice. The practice occurs only where, underpinning the institutions of state, there is knowledge that freedom entails conflict. Thus, whilst there may be a veneer of consent via a social contract, the state accepts that there is no demos that meekly consents to relations of subordination in which the state lays down proper channels for dissent. Parts of the demos – employing either direct or oblique means – will always be working to transform those relations into struggles that upend the supposed social contract.

By noting that there is a veneer of consent, I keep the social contract in the picture, where it works as an imposture. Of course, it is open to people exercising constituent power to be forthright and reject the social contract as a sham. Equally, though, they may enter into the charade, accepting the social contract with a knowing wink when they deem that doing so can somehow advance the long-term aim of rule by the people.

The oblique approach, added to the forthright approach, shows the breadth of the repertoire that people have when they are exercising constituent power. They can take a range of action that fits with the three guiding principles set down by Machiavelli for a free people to form an enduring polity. The first principle is to display prudence in dealing with others, instead of forming pacts that flow from establishing agreed true ideas of good as opposed to evil. The second principle is to dare to seize from fortune what is necessary for the polity to be founded and to endure. The third is to dissemble, in circumstances where being forthright would set back the cause of the free people forming the polity.

Dynamic of the movement of movements

I have argued that the make-up of the movement of movements, or rather the style in which it coheres, lines up with the theory of agonistic democracy. The dynamic of the movement can now be stated as follows. In the nineties, the constitutionalist state, working as an imposture, had a three-fold interface with the active left. There was a part of the active left that rejected the state and took direct action – this was the extraparliamentary left. Another part of the active left chose knowingly and actively to keep up a pretence of accepting the social contract. It saw the cynics-in-power for what they were, and it loathed them, but it wore a mask of obedience to constituted authority. Its ploy was to use
‘legitimacy’ – the fiction of legitimate rule – as a restraint on the cynics-in-power. A third part of the active left guilelessly accepted the social contract. That is to say, it believed liberal (and republican) rhetoric about covenants, and it consented to state rule. It took indirect action, viewing that action as a legitimate and worthwhile adjunct to exercising the right to vote.

Both the extraparliamentary left and wearers of the mask of obedience are exercising constituent power: they form subject-groups. The other activists are captured by constituted power. Together with people who are not politically active, they are caught in a subjugated group.

That said, it needs to be kept in mind that what is being expressed is a set of dynamic conditions. There are no individual subjects, each of whom sits stably in a given part of the active left, or sits stably outside the active left. Subjectivity exists only in a metastable form; it coheres, as conditions permit, to form actual subjects, but in doing so, it always produces a remainder or supplement in each subject. A remainder is an illicit sliver of otherness, now and again disrupting, if ever so slightly and fleetingly, what claims to be a stable, self-identical being. Hence, the three-part active left as posited above is a three-way conflict or melee, making up the metastable subjectivity that was involved in the active left of the nineties. That is in keeping with agonistic democracy, which has conflict going on at the micro level in the individual subject, not just between subjects or between groups of subjects.

My point is that agonistic democracy is a versatile practice. People may gain freedom by using constituent power, and they may gain freedom by working with constituted power in such a way as to shift the constituted power to a new footing. To the credit of agonistic democracy, it allows both. The openness in that regard gives agonistic democracy a strong claim to be recognised as a practice that shaped the movement of movements.

9.4 Excursus: the cinema trail

Too much doubt, and never enough

Drawing on facts about the movement of movements, I have put a case that Chiapas and the EZLN are a singularity in a serial meeting of singularities. From there I have proceeded to argue that the movement of movements was not a pure expression of constituent power, but instead took the form of agonistic democracy. The argument can be taken further, when one admits that the field of evidence comprises not only data as understood in the sciences, but also evidence accessed through the arts.

It is helpful – I think this is non-contentious – to look at the real through the sciences and through the arts. There is no disjuncture between the two ways of seeing. There is a relay, in which science energises art, and art science. The relay between science and art can be a key life-affirming process in the biosphere.
An important condition of art, which sets it apart from science, is the fact of art’s being immersed in a special kind of doubt, namely disavowal. Artists experiment with projects that may create or alter the actual. Such work attests to the artists’ disavowing their knowledge that the actual is mapped out and is simply waiting to be deciphered. Thus, art opens out to unfathomable, enigmatic events: the attitude bespeaks a refusal to be part of any detached judgment on the connecting of things. Instead, there is a keenness to enter into the raw connecting of things and to evaluate the chaosmos whilst perched as a part within the chaosmos.

Normal science, as described by Kuhn, veers toward the other extreme, with its adherents taking it for granted that the actual is all mapped out and just waiting to be deciphered. I am setting aside periods of scientific revolution, which yield (in Kuhn’s words) abnormal science. Normal science involves people in their professions’ figurative lab coats, working on projects that may reveal the actual state of things, and on projects for inventing gear that taps into actual things’ potential.

A normal scientist, then, would have to wait for the odd unguarded moment when her lab coat is skew-whiff, before she could entertain thoughts of projects that may create or alter the actual. Normal science is built on a repressed heresy: it just abhors the seditious thought that to see is to act in what you see, or, ‘what you get is what you see.’ ‘No-no-no, no-no,’ says Reason, ‘the dots do not connect at will. That’s haphazard, improper, and we’ll not hear another word of it.’ So, the dots shall connect as Reason, the coolly detached judge, says it is possible for them to connect. Particle physics aside (it can be the exception that proves the rule), the traffic shall flow one way. The inquirer shall see the datum; the datum shan’t see the inquirer seeing it.

Kuhn may well have been right in pointing to the merits of normal science, viewing it as part of the relay that shunts between abnormal science and the normal variety. Scientific upsets, bouts of infighting and ruptures punctuate normal science, and that goes some way toward counteracting the repressive force that reigns in normal science. But is it wise to place one’s faith entirely in the relay that happens within science, to the neglect of the relay between science and art?

I think it unwise to be so science-minded. Art has a distinctive manner of counteracting the repressive force of normal science. Art counters the repressive force on a day-to-day basis. Also, art counters the repressive force with a process of immanent evaluation, expressing active force. What would happen without the exercising of that active force through art? Art may well be responsible for keeping alive the prospect of repeated bouts of scientific turmoil. Given the repressive character of normal science, to have science without its bouts of turmoil would be a disaster.

Why cinema, and why mainstream films

Within the arts, I turn to mainstream cinema for evidence bearing on the character of the movement of movements. Leading me to do that is the fact that mainstream film reaches a
mass audience. The movies bring into common use, and they keep renewing, a wide-ranging blend of verbal and non-verbal tropes, a blend which, coupled with the tropes of mass audience television and radio programs and media guides, forms a demotic language. (The movies, TV and radio, and media guides … are like, pay attention to us and find out who the cool characters are. Like, to get by, you need to be relevant in a water-cooler sense. And I’m, hmmm, that doesn’t happen by reading, better look and listen.)

It is not just by happenstance that the movies speak and spread a vernacular language. Cinema has the genealogy for it. Cinema’s direct precursors, in terms of its social function, are variety, music hall and vaudeville. Their precursors in turn are pantomime, and before that, in the baroque, commedia dell’arte; and going back further still, the trail leads to the vernacular drama of thirteenth-century Europe. Cinema is the fifth generation in that line of demotic performance and spectacle. Each generation is heir to a knack with active force, a gift that was first shown by roving troupes of producer-performers in the late middle ages, as they brought mystery, morality and miracle plays to the people at large. It is a gift of cracking apart the controlled spectacle, by which organised religion or state power presses a parasitic order on people. It is a gift, at the same time, of spontaneously joining forces of production to make a demotic performance and spectacle.

**The thriller connection**

One could be forgiven for thinking that, in mainstream cinema made for Western audiences, by the 1990s the knack with active force had gone missing. New Hollywood was long since a fait accompli, and the kind of filmmaking it demanded was strictly formula-driven and workshopped like washing powders with focus groups. The sole field in mainstream film that had a clear affinity with demotic performance and spectacle was the stalker sub-genre of horror films. (Stalker films are made for teen and young adult audiences, and they work with the help of collective audience participation. The sub-genre has stock characters, stock settings, and narratives spiced by the improvised work of pranksters; it also has a learned repertoire of routines (a portfolio of schtick), paralleling the lazzì of commedia dell’arte. Together, those features invite audiences to produce their own works in the stalker vein – in the form of role playing games, cyberdrama, film, or a mix of those media. Thus, being in a stalker fan group is a nineties equivalent, or echo, of the demotic performance of bygone days.)

At first blush, the stalker sub-genre (even with the audience participating) looks like just another culture industry product. In other words, it is entertainment of the kind that critical theorists in the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer hold in contempt. It is only after some reflection, and glancing back at mainstream film in earlier decades, that one sees a hint of something besides entertainment in nineties stalker films; and indeed, one feels a current of sedition in nineties mainstream film right across the thriller genre.

The sedition – of which I say more below – relates to the dynamic of agonistic democracy. Working outward from thriller to other genres, one finds a few more films from the nineties sharing in the relation. In all, the search nets a modest-sized cluster of films from
the nineties, each of the films serving as an index of what was then going on, in terms of active force opening up cracks in the decade’s centrist political order. The lode is richest in a film from the final year of the decade, Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*.

**Memento and more**

To appreciate what *Memento* does, one needs to have a feeling for the history of thrillers of a subversive bent in mainstream cinema, going back at least three decades. A run of movies in a subversive vein and made for mass audiences – notably, revisionist Westerns, but also subversive thrillers – came out after the breakdown in ‘66 of the Hollywood Production Code. In revisionist detective thrillers, crime pays, and corruption reigns. Revisionist horror films took up the theme of oppression as it works in and through piety and the family; the famous mad-housewife paranoia films, *Rosemary’s Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1969) and *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975), are instances that spring to mind. But the main current in subversive thrillers from the seventies consists of thrillers on a theme of conspiracy and paranoia where the rot does not centre on patriarchal order.

In the mainstream conspiracy thrillers of the seventies, paranoia was directed at a menace within the central institutions of state. Gone was the day of films with a menace such as the Nazis, the Soviet bloc, gangster networks, or metaphors for them (things from outer space, things from black lagoons). Gone was the menace that was fought by the state, or, in true Hollywood tradition, fought by a lone hero despite the ineptitude of state agencies. The menacing presence in the seventies was that of corrupt institutions of state, helping to carry out the plans of a secretive power elite. The decade’s conspiracy thrillers, though they are by various authors, fit together as a set of stories told within a frame narrative about a cover-up of gross abuse of state power. The frame narrative involves a ‘free world’ that is secretly run by the US military-industrial complex, or military-industrial and surveillance complex.

The eighties and especially the nineties brought a further twist in mainstream thrillers. Horror films and detective and conspiracy thrillers emerge in which one’s paranoia and/or horror turn acutely inward. Pioneered by David Cronenberg, the films – the most graphic among them are horror films or thriller sci-fi hybrids – show the menace as a predator that is a living part of its victims’ bodies. The predator takes shape in the victim’s grey matter or other tissue, and/or in the bodily fluids. The predator-victim is in possession of a body that organises to get sliced and diced, or divided against itself, and grows by devouring its parts. The ‘body paranoia’ films conjure up horror and suspense, around the fading of the line between self and non-self. The line fades in a hostile setting that provides scope for both helpful pretence and betrayal.

The anxiety about one’s body being divided against itself – and having to choose, with not enough evidence to go on, which parts to trust – is an overdetermined malaise. On one view, the anxiety is a response to an actual development, around 1980, in the frame narrative of the seventies conspiracy thrillers. Up to 1980, the menace was the military-industrial and surveillance complex – a beast armed with those three tentacles or prongs. From 1980 on, we have the spread of video, the growth of multimedia conglomerates that wield enormous
power, and new Hollywood. The complex has mutated and now flexes a fourth prong, its most insidious. The new prong is (dis)information and entertainment, also known as infotainment.

The following nineties films – some of them are thrillers and some are in other genres – play explicitly to the anxiety about the complex’s fourth prong: The Player (Robert Altman, 1992); Natural Born Killers (Oliver Stone, 1994); Strange Days (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995); Mad City (Costa-Gavras, 1997); Dave (Ivan Reitman, 1993); Wag the Dog (Barry Levinson, 1997); The Truman Show (Peter Weir, 1998); The Matrix (1999); and eXistenZ (David Cronenberg, 1999). In addition, several nineties thrillers play implicitly to anxiety about the fourth prong, by creating the affect of paranoia and/or horror which, at some point, turns acutely inward: Shattered (Wolfgang Petersen, 1991); Safe (Todd Haynes, 1995); Twelve Monkeys (Terry Gilliam, 1995); David Fincher’s Seven (1995) and Fight Club (1999); Arlington Road (Mark Pellington, 1999); and The Sixth Sense (M Night Shyalaman, 1999). Horror turned inward is also a staple of horror films in the splatter sub-genre, alias slice and dice. (Splatter has a past going back to Cronenberg’s 1974 film They Came From Within; and the same director’s Videodrome (1983) is a landmark work for the nineties films that play explicitly to anxiety about the fourth prong of the menacing complex.)

Films themed on the four-pronged menace gain in power when they point to the fact that the business of filmmaking and filmgoing is itself part of the menace (it is in the fourth prong). Obviously, the business of making paranoia thrillers and watching them is not exempt. It sometimes happens that a film about the menace dares to state the obvious, by pointing to its compromised position and that of its audience as well. Such a film preemptively exposes the process in which its authors and its viewers are suborned; and the exposure dents the process. The Player is wonderfully clever throughout in that regard. The exposure culminates in the film’s closing moments, where one is hit with the visceral knowledge of one’s actual complicity in the scenario portrayed and watched.

Thinking back to fifties and sixties body-snatcher movies, the suspense and the horror in them are unleashed by the protagonist’s efforts to avert the disaster of having her body taken over by the menace. That pattern does not apply in late century body paranoia films. Now, the protagonist has already succumbed; her body has already been snatched (penetrated), but perhaps not in its entirety, perhaps not all the time. The most creative of the body paranoia films take a cue from the disaster thriller genre: when the disaster engulfs, or almost engulfs, the centre of the storyworld, that is not the climax. It’s just the end of the prelude, with the main story about to begin. Thus, in body paranoia thriller at its best, the centre’s engulfment in disaster comes early in the film. It is the start of a gripping adventure of uncertainty and struggle, which will be played out by the parts making up the protagonist, the shattered ‘I.’

In the nineties thrillers I have mentioned so far, the audience witnesses the adventure while ‘in the dark’ as to its key point. The ‘hit’ of visceral knowledge about perfidy within the self is reserved for the ending. That is true of Seven, Fight Club, Arlington Road, The Sixth Sense, and even The Player. Memento breaks out from that pattern, to let the audience taste the perfidy within the self, and the struggle going on around that, from the beginning of
the film. In doing so, *Memento* shows the use of a mask of obedience in circumstances rather like those where a mask of obedience is used in agonistic democracy.

In *Memento*’s flawed hero, Leonard, we have a man who is in some ways feeble. But he sees a cynic-in-power – the ‘handler’ who is looking after him – for the parasite that a cynic-in-power is. The handler repeatedly urges Leonard to find and kill the ‘culprit’ in the death of Leonard’s wife. Leonard gets only a glimpse of how he is being used, and an unreliable glimpse at that, but he loathes the handler for it. Leonard creates for himself a mask of obedience to the handler, the cynic-in-power. For Leonard, the mask is a means of marshalling his own power. Using it, he ‘tricks’ himself into killing the cynic-in-power. *Memento* shows that, sometimes, by pretending to obey an agent that is exerting repressive force on you (and through you on others), you may overcome the repressive force and escape to have a new life. The film is an object lesson in the power of the false, used actively, so as to overcome repressive force. Used actively, the power of the false bestows enlightened false consciousness, but in a form that departs from the ones Peter Sloterdijk explores in his trenchant writings on political cynicism. The power of the false at work in *Memento* is a disavowal of one’s being cornered by a stronger power. It is the vital ‘Je sais bien ... mais quand même ...’ (‘I know very well ... but all the same ...’), without which there would be no more stories actively to be read.

*Memento* is a tour de force. Lining it up with the other films I have mentioned above – mostly thrillers, with a sprinkling of drama and comedy – one sees how it fits, with them, in the frame story. In other words, the cluster of films I have named from the nineties fits in the frame narrative of the sprouting of a new prong, infotainment, by the military-industrial and surveillance complex. And *Memento*, viewed in the context of all the films, lends particular support to the claims in the thesis about agonistic democracy and playing ‘non-cynic’ (that is to say, donning a mask of obedience) as a use of active force.

Alas, the cinema tail of my thesis wags the pooch. There are many more nineties mainstream movies that form part of the decade’s politics, in different and interesting ways. But that discussion has to take place elsewhere, since it is not strictly needed here.

### 9.5 Point of departure

What price now the claims argued here, about the nature of the movement of movements? It is a truism that the world is much changed since the massive terrorist attacks on US soil in September 2001. But the world did not start again from zero. Most of what was happening before the ‘war on terror’ continues now, with the difference that some parts of it continue in intensified form, other parts in rarefied form. That September day was not a point of sheer political discontinuity. Rather, it made continuity strange, and it did so in ways that will be seen differently from different standpoints, as events unfold.

As I write these words, Jonathan Demme’s remake of the prescient 1962 thriller *The Manchurian Candidate* (an adaptation of the 1959 novel of the same name by Richard Condon) is screening in cinemas here in Sydney. It is a sign that the nineties cycle of
conspiracy thrillers has not yet spent its force. If another sign were needed, perhaps it is the mad-housewife thriller The Forgotten (Joseph Ruben, 2004). Or it could be David Mamet’s action thriller, Spartan (2004), which is an allegory on the subject of US democracy’s plight today.

What is more, two recent feature-length documentaries by Michael Moore (Bowling for Columbine (2002) and Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004)), which have harsh things to say about the military-industrial complex, have been hits at the box office. A third feature-length documentary, now screening in cinemas, is The Corporation (Jennifer Abbott and Mark Achbar, 2004). It warns about the military-industrial and surveillance complex, by revealing how people and nonhuman life forms fare, and what we can expect, in a world shaped by postfordist production. Completing the quartet – and bringing into view the four-pronged menace – is Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism (Robert Greenwald, 2004), a film that takes to task the infotainment czar.

Also as I write these words, a US President symbolising everything that the movement of movements wants to change, has won an impressive popular mandate for a second term in office. The people of the US have spoken, through the main mouthpiece they are given in the constitutionalist state.

As will long be remembered, the movement of movements called people to a global day of action on 22-23 February 2003, in an attempt to stop the US-led coalition from invading Iraq. Between six and ten million people attended mass rallies as part of the day of action (according to the BBC News). State power, of the sole superpower kind, prevailed, and the invasion and ensuing US occupation of Iraq went ahead. Seen in those terms, the February ’03 day of action was a letdown for the movement. Since that day, the movement seems to have been pausing for breath. It has been causing less of a stir in public than had been the case between 1999 and early 2003.

The decade I have covered of the movement of movements has taught me that whilst the movement is young, it has gleaned from the past a good share of wisdom. Somehow, the movement puts me in mind of a character Samuel Beckett created, in Worstward Ho. The playwright does not give the character a name; I think of her as a distant cousin of Scheherazade. Her harried voice speaks to us in a world made up of stories, and in the knowledge that none of us gets out alive from the circle of storytelling. The movement of movements is full of promise, and resilient; it will go on, at the very least, by taking a cue from that character in Beckett: ‘Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’