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## **Drawing as an ethico-political practice**

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### **Abstract**

This essay explores drawing as an ethico-political practice. Taking London as an example, I speculate about a critical and creative, radical and imaginative engagement with speculative urbanization processes at a time when the extreme right is on the rise and the populist far right has become increasingly mainstream. Reflecting on a nonrepresentational drawing approach that responds to distanced expert eyes by breaking free from their knowledge and pre-defined moral standards of the capitalist city, I explore different lines: lines that commodify the cityscape; lines that cross commodifying categories; lines that creatively produce alternatives; and lines of violent creativity. In so doing, I scrutinize conservative links between a visuality of capital accumulation and fascist urban aesthetics.

### **Keywords**

Drawing, Cityscape, Capitalism, Fascism, Ethics

## **Many Lines**

In this essay I draw lines and I write about lines. My case example is London's towering cityscape and the construction of speculative towers for financial, insurance, and real estate companies. How can I engage with the city's urban development trajectory and its visibility of capital accumulation in critical and creative, radical and imaginative ways? The lines that I draw and the words that I write aim to intervene in the commodified cityscape at a time when the extreme right is on the rise and the populist far right has become increasingly mainstream.

But why drawing lines? I explore a convention that has proven to be extremely productive for the city's development trajectory. It is by means of reducing the built environment to a series of lines that professionals including architects, planners, real estate developers, and urban historians assess the visual impact of a proposed tower development on the wider cityscape.<sup>1</sup> It is also by means of drawing and assessing lines that they create a visual order and rightness that they can agree on (Gassner 2021).

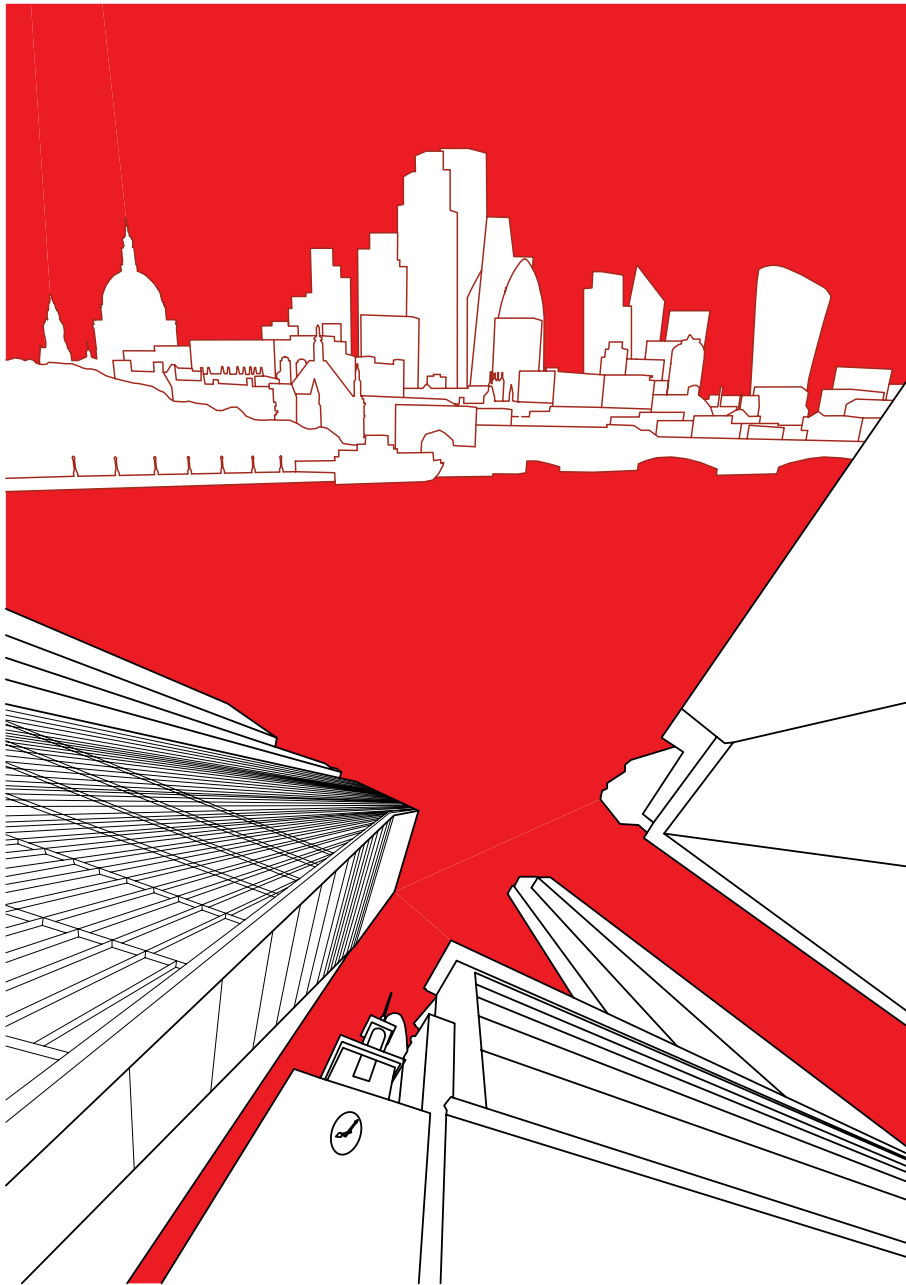


Figure 1

Their lines are drawn and assessed from a distance and include, most prominently, the outlines of St Paul's Cathedral and the ones of office towers such as 110 Bishopsgate, 22 Bishopsgate, 1 Undershaft, 122 Leadenhall, and 20 Fenchurch as seen against the sky (see Figure 1, top). They are based on the idea that selected historic structures and buildings of so-called "civic importance" (CABE 2010) ought to remain the visually dominant structures in the city. St Paul's is being described as one

of the most “valued components of the historic environment” (GLA 2016, 414) whereas tall office buildings are offered as structures that must not harm the cathedral’s visibility and appreciability. To this end, towers are grouped in a way that individual structures appear to form one overall skyline profile (CoL 2002). In distant views from Waterloo Bridge, this profile represents the ridge of a natural landscape: a hill that rises from the low and mid-height built environment to 1 Undershaft, which is the centrally located and tallest tower in the group. The cathedral stands apart. And it is for this reason, so professionals suggest, that attention is drawn to it (CABE 2010).

Changing the standpoint from Waterloo Bridge to one within the City of London – looking up rather than looking out – the outlines of St Paul’s are concealed as are those of some of the office towers (see Figure 1, bottom). The visual order and rightness is maintained in different ways. Tower developments are used to create new lines of sight towards St Margaret Pattens, St Andrew Undershaft, St Ethelburga, or another of the 45 church buildings in the City of London. In this way, the presence of sacred structures is apparently heightened; despite or, better, with the help of the overpowering height of office towers.<sup>2</sup>

This, then, is the current viscosity of capital accumulation: from afar and from within the City of London, lines are drawn that promote a traditional and seemingly not-for-profit aesthetic. Yet, this is an aesthetic that enables the construction of more and more speculative towers (Gassner 2020). By means of emphasizing the importance of selected historic buildings, static and highly profitable reference lines like the outlines of church buildings are being defined. Once professionals introduce these

reference lines, office towers can easily be described as beneficial to – because they operate within – a conservative approach to the cityscape.

The introduced reference lines are as much visual as they are moral. They define what is seen as well as what ought to be seen, based on assumptions of what the true, right, and beautiful city is. These lines draw on an essentialist reading of the city, which is found in the visual protection of historic and sacred built structures. Stasis (essence of the city) and visual change (introducing new and enlarging existing profit-making terrains) are categories that are very much in use here; and they are not offered as opposites. Rather, stasis enables visual change within a city that does not deviate from its speculative development trajectory. In the end, visual change is decoupled from socio-economic change.

But different lines can be drawn. There are lines like the ones described above that cut up the cityscape in a strict way and within a rigid visual frame. They divide the built environment into the horizontal and the vertical city; the old and the new city; the sacred and the secular city; the private and the public city. They operate in what Deleuze and Guattari (2016) describe as the “molar realm of representations” (256). Drawing these lines means drawing distinctions that capitalize on keeping the city on its speculative development trajectory. These lines, however, can also be crossed with the help of other lines.

A second type of lines operates in the “molecular realm of desires and beliefs” (256). These lines are individual detours. For example, diagonal lines can be drawn that cut across the distinction between the low and the tall built environments and the different

values that professionals attach to these categories in planning processes. Lines can be drawn that explore the ever-same social and economic relations that are encapsulated in new commodities that have just appeared on the skyline. Lines can be drawn that do not join in a belief in endless economic growth. Lines can be drawn that open up the commodified cityscape to radical and imaginative critique. These lines “open up” because commodifying the cityscape implies the drawing of outlines. The lines of capital accumulation are closing lines of structures, programs, and ownerships that operate within an enclosed view of the city. They divide and they exclude.

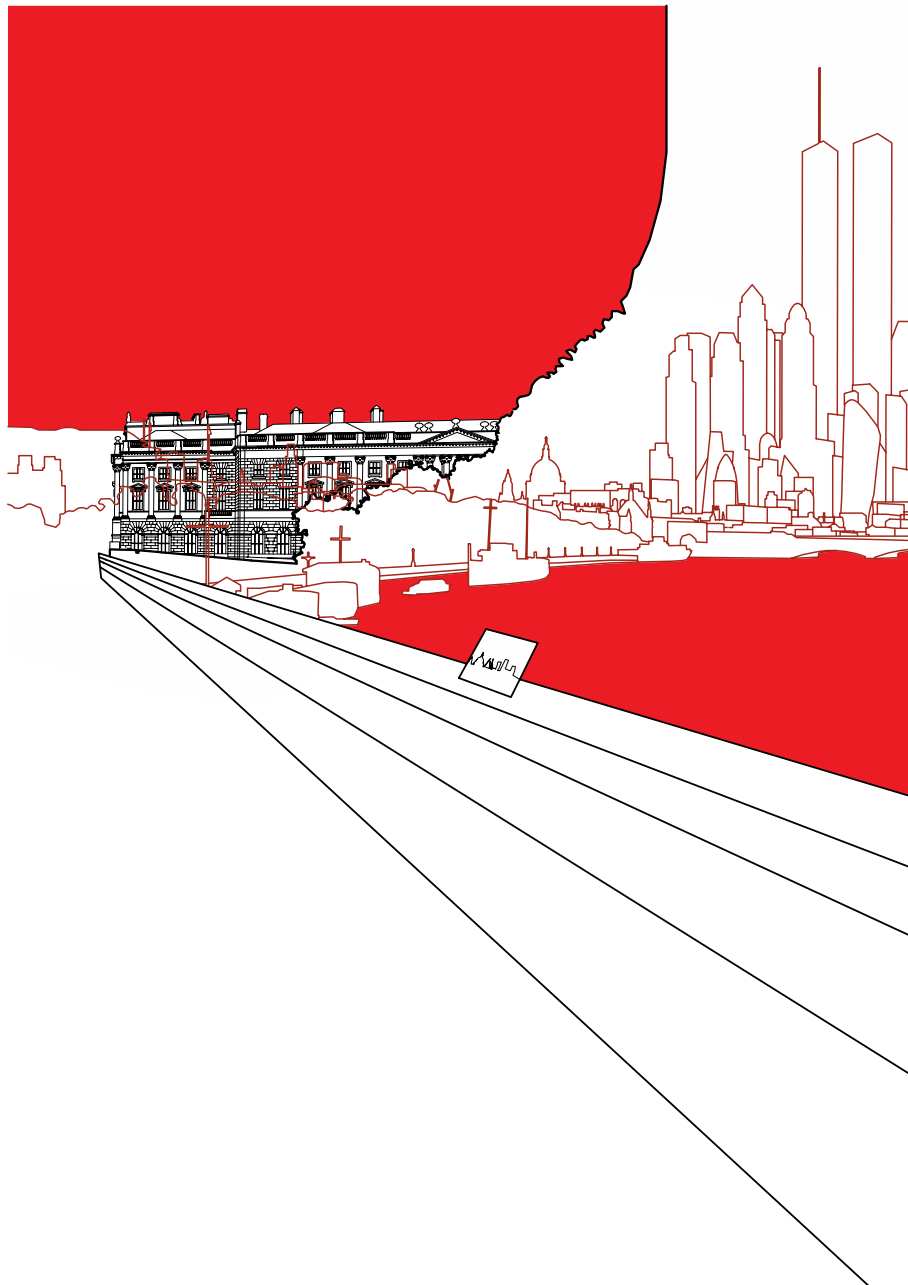


Figure 2





Figure 3

Still, drawing the city can produce yet another type of lines. The lines mentioned so far operate in direct relation to the visibility of capital accumulation. But drawing can also become a practice that escapes this visibility: flying through the city or shooting off into the sky, evading a system of conventional and conservative sight lines and skylines. A line might escape the formalism of lined-up (and cultivated) plane trees on the Embankment and shoot off. It might open a space for additional speculative

development, based on a conservative understanding of the sky-line that developed no earlier than in the late nineteenth century in New York City and Chicago, based on the idea that the urban skyline can and should be clearly separated from the natural horizon (see Figure 2). Or a line might escape the static viewpoint on Waterloo Bridge that is so crucial for controlling a “representative” representation of London that is sent around the world in order to attract global investment and revenue-generating tourists. This line might speed up, violate connections across the Thames, and further divide North and South London, exacerbating spatial injustices in the city (see Figure 3).<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps lines of that type can be called “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 2016; Deleuze and Parnet 2002). They do not disrupt but they seemingly escape London’s visuality of capital accumulation. They seem to be the result of an unrestrained creativity. And, yet, they are not always productive. Indeed, they can be the most violent ones that can be drawn. If a line of flight is not recaptured by the capitalist city and if it does not create links with another line of flight, as I will note later in this essay, then it might speed up, intensify, and become purely destructive (see Purcell and Born 2017). In other words, the line might become fascistic. This suggestion draws on a key aspect that Deleuze and Guattari emphasize in order to distinguish fascism from authoritarianism and totalitarian power . A micro-fascist line is not one that is divided into its smallest segments, controlled by an oppressive or even totalitarian state.<sup>4</sup> Instead, a line can become fascistic when it becomes totalizing in and for itself; when it captures everything that is coming in its reach – a “micro-black hole” (Deleuze and Guattari 2016, 250).

Why emphasizing a structural affinity between drawn and political lines? Unlike a point, which is a momentarily encounter with the city, and unlike a plane, which occupies a territory and lends itself to imposing ownership, a line draws distinctions and can draw connections. A line organizes, categorizes and structures the city. And only when it turns into a vector, which is not defined by a start and an end point but by a direction of movement, it can free itself from an oppressive logic. A line of flight can be such a vector. But it can also be one that transforms “into a line of pure destruction and abolition” (269).

Destroying a visual order and rightness in the city is politically desirable when it opens a space for alternative ways of sensing and making sense of the city. A micro-fascist line, however, is not destructive in this sense. It does not destroy in order to create. Instead, it is a line that does nothing but create further destruction or, as I call it, a line of violent creativity. If there is a parallel between the visual and moral lines of capital accumulation and the fascist death drive of a line of flight then it is conservatism. Despite all the rhetoric of a revolutionary new beginning, fascism is conservative in that it consolidates capitalist arrangements and desires codes that “fix subjects to rigid boundaries of thought and action and fix bodies to pre-established patterns of flows” (Bonta and Protevi 2006, 86). Fascism, then, is both violent and conservative. Unlike thinking, which is a destructive force because it does not accept pre-defined standards and norms (Arendt 1978), fascism is violence based on a conservative engagement with the world. Drawing for a city that is livable and alive, I suggest, implies a process of exploring lines that cross commodifying categories and lines that creatively produce alternatives (see Figure 4).

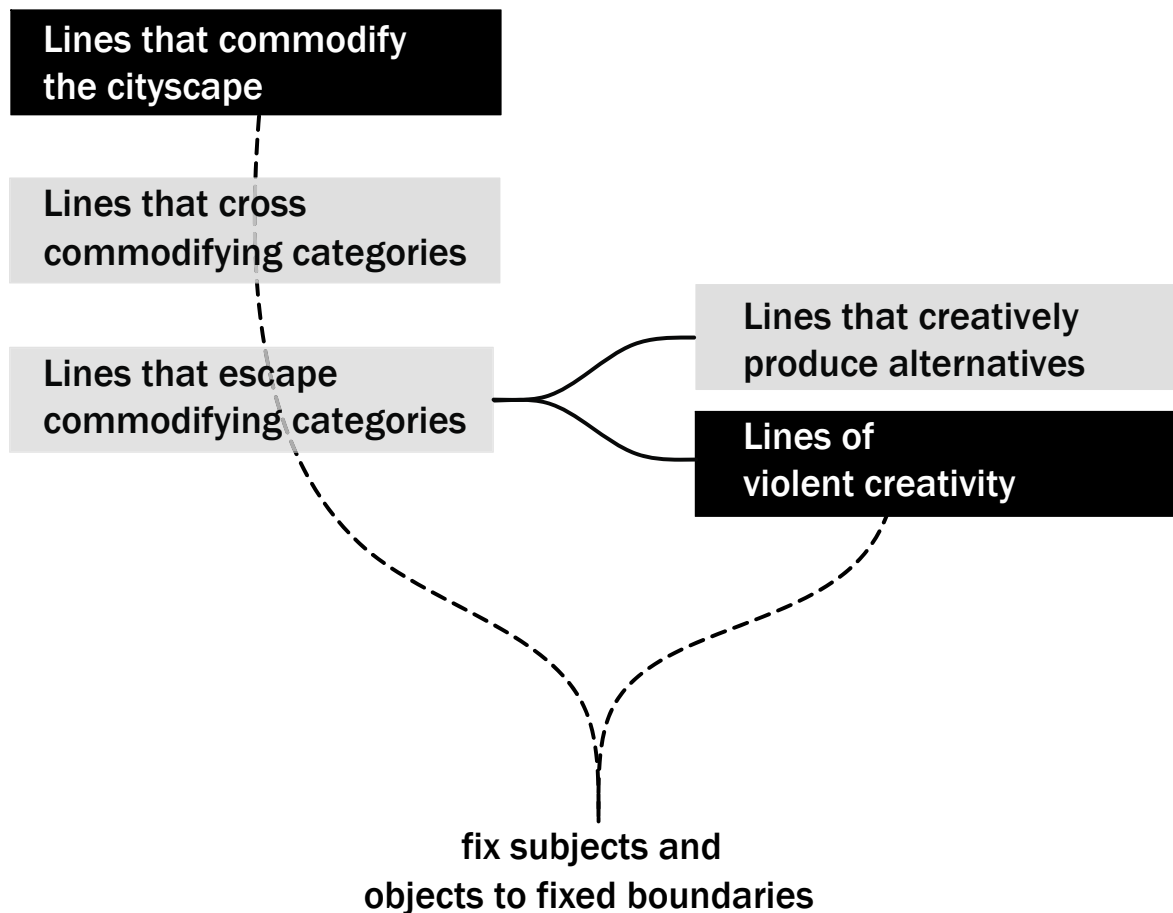


Figure 4

Fascists separate the city into an “us’ and a ‘them’” (Stanley 2020). They often see cities not only “as centers of disease and pestilence, containing squalid ghettos filled with despised minority groups living off the work of others” (149), which is a view that was widely shared in Nazism. They also see – and use – them as places for mass propaganda and violent action. Fascists target cosmopolitans, and religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities. They also suggest – or are led to believe – that they target financial elites.

Despite the 2008 global financial crash, speculative tower construction in the City of London did not stop or slow down. The financial sector’s political and economic influence on the U.K. government’s decision making processes increased (Talami

2012). A decade of austerity politics has destroyed the livelihoods of many. Claims that reductions in social welfare and local government funding cannot end because of EU integration and globalization were and are coupled with “cutting again the taxes on the super-rich and corporate earnings to preserve the country’s ‘attractiveness’” (Duval 2018). This contributed to the further “vanquishing of propoor egalitarian politics” and the “rise of anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric” (Blencowe 2016, 24), i.e. it nurtured a politics of “us” against “them.”

In an “age of resurgent fascism” (Beiner 2018), and in order to fight continuing and new forms of nationalism and racism (Mondon and Winter 2020), it is important not to understand fascism merely as an ideology; precisely in order to explore how liberalism in practice enables fascist processes (Landa 2012). Drawing lines, I am particularly concerned about the aesthetic structure and the representational logic of different forms of “city or neighborhood fascism” (Deleuze and Guattari 2016, 250). This implies, first of all, an understanding of cityscapes as violent processes of exploitation, discrimination, and displacement rather than and, as suggested above, also based on the enshrinement of singled out physical structures including St Paul’s. Second, and against overtly autocratic forms of city-making, it involves an understanding of cityscapes as environments (and visual backdrops) for propaganda and violence (consider the mob storming the US Capitol on 6 January 2021). Seen from this angle, fascist urban aesthetics is an unbound and seemingly revolutionary experience that, if it finds mass support, makes it a distinct right-wing force.

In this essay, fascist urban aesthetics, therefore, refers less to the imposition of stylistic characteristics of architecture (e.g., neo-classicism, monumentality, symmetry) and

urban plans (e.g., straight street axes connecting “community” monuments) as we know it from classical fascism in Germany and Italy (Sudjic 2006). Instead, it revolves around a mobilizing creativity that capitalizes on a referent for value (nation, culture, race) and that is nothing but violent. What is it that transforms a line that escapes the commodified cityscape into a fascist line? It is the total experience of violent creativity, i.e. an experience of violence that feeds on more and more violence including self-harm. The political conservatism of such an experience is what Benjamin (2006) describes as the “*aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism*” (270 original emphasis). Fascism is conservative because it does not create anything new that is of value for the world. This is why it cannot be radical; but it surely is extreme. It is a pseudo-rebellion against capitalism in which racial categories function as social categories.

If politics is based on desires for socio-economic change, fascism replaces these desires with a de-politicized spectacular performance of creativity. In the end, Benjamin (2006) argues, “[a]ll efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in [...] war” (269, original emphasis). Only physical destruction and death on a massive scale become spectacles that are intense enough to satisfy the political craving for transformation without, however, changing the capitalist class structure: humankind’s “self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure” (270).

Among the many lines that can be drawn, I experiment with lines that do not accept a decoupling from fundamental socio-economic change. Drawing against a nationalist and racist city, I investigate lines that disrupt commodifying categories as well as lines

that creatively produce alternatives in order to enter into an ethical engagement with the city.

## **Urban Ethics**

Drawing, here, is a practice of learning and unlearning the representations and codes that professionals employ in their accounts of the true, right, and beautiful city. At the same time, it is a process of investigating lines of creative productivity in order to identify those lines that are nothing but violent. I start by tracing outlines that are being produced, assessed, and approved in planning processes for speculative towers in the City of London. I occupy viewing positions (Waterloo Bridge and Bishopsgate) that are well-known. And I keep drawing. I draw lines elsewhere. Tracing – which is an act of representing, i.e. copying without changing in nature – is being turned into mapping, i.e. an act of creating against urban representation (see Figures 2, 3, 5, and 6).

I adopt a nonrepresentational approach inasmuch as the lines that I draw do not stand in directly for a city with the help of a static “likeness” (Vickery 2015, 331). I do not aim to represent the true, right, and beautiful city. Trying to erase lines of capital accumulation and lines of violent creativity, I mobilize the idea that a city cannot be truthfully represented in a politically meaningful way. Of interest is not simply the known city, not even the knowable city, but thinking the city, i.e. destroying pre-defined standards and norms of knowing the city.<sup>5</sup> But I also put a nonrepresentational approach to the test. I draw and get away from the adoption of a “distantiated, expert ‘eye’ in regard to a thereby externalized landscape” (Vickery 2015, 329). And yet, I nevertheless keep some distance between what I draw and where I draw it.

The lines that I draw are not like Brice's (2018) insightful observational drawings with the help of which she opens up "new spaces of encounter within a more-than-human world" (137) and a process of "learning and unlearning through a lived encounter" (143). I stay purposefully close to the visual practice of design-related professionals because I am particularly interested in the moment in which a line that draws commodifying categories can be deviated into a line that intervenes politically in a disruptive way; or the moment in which a line of creative productivity is in danger of becoming one of violence. I draw lines at a distance from the city, unable to become attuned to certain processes of change (human encounters, human and non-human encounters, different light atmospheres, etc.). I have taken pictures in and of the city. I have collected planning documents in the past. Now I embed them in an AutoCad document in order to turn tracing into mapping.

I juxtapose and superimpose a cityscape that is close by with one that is far away (see Vickery 2015). I do this either by imagining to move from one viewing position in the city to another (see Figures 1, 5, and 6) or by imagining to turn my head to the left (see Figures 2 and 3). In so doing, I start speculating about a "city yet to come," to borrow a phrase from AbdouMalik Simone. Two spaces gain particular political relevance: the space of the river that enables an uninterrupted line of vision towards speculative towers in the distance, and the space of the sky in which profit-driven building height competes against itself. Lines that commodify the cityscape keep clear of the former in order to conquer the latter.





Figure 5



Figure 6

Following the architectural convention of reducing the city to a series of lines, I reproduce disconnections between me as a self-reflective and self-aware aesthetic subject and objects that constitute what is experienced in the city. As Jackson (2016) argues, cognition that is conceptualized as emerging from reflective judgment exemplifies a Western Enlightenment approach that “posits a separate and separating subject as a critical, self-reflective unit necessary for politicization” (18). This essay

showcases separation in order to problematize it. There is a politics of interpretation involved in the process of drawing lines. And there is also a politics of experience. I experience lines; I interpret lines; I experience drawing lines and drawn lines. There is, then, not only a gap between experience and interpretation that avoids “overwhelming a politics of affect with one based on cognition” (Frost 2010, 443) in the process of drawing, but also a complex entanglement of them.

As a producing-receiving-machine, I produce (in terms of drawing lines), and I receive (in terms of drawing benefits by drawing lines and by drawn lines), without that the one can be separated from the other. Drawing unsettles my own way of seeing the city. For example, I draw office towers (20 Fenchurch and the proposed, approved but never built scheme for 22 Bishopsgate) close to St Paul’s and far enough from other towers so that I cannot see these speculative structures forming one overall skyline profile (see Figure 5). I explore various different distances in order to ask myself how much visual significance I am prepared to give to the cathedral. Or I draw outlines of a generic mosque in close visual proximity to St Paul’s (see Figure 6). I scale the mosque up and down, redraw lines until I identify a moment where the central position of the cathedral that has accompanied me for a long time is neither retained nor negated but, rather, put into tension.

Just as much as I speculate about a city yet to come, I also speculate about various different ways of how a reader of this essay might be affected by the lines that I draw. Where does she draw the line between a traditional and a financialized cityscape? What lines would she want to draw, what categories would she be willing to accept? What forms of destruction does she see when new lines are being drawn? Asking

these questions is not geared towards finding an answer. Here, speculation does not lead to an end point but opens up possibilities. This is also why I am cautious about representing my drawings with words. The included drawings are not described in any detail. They are not being given captions (although they are referred to in the text). Why should someone write so many words about so many lines? Why should anyone write words about lines at all? Not for representing cityscapes or drawings of cityscapes, but for the main reason of presenting a creative process.

In the process of drawing lines, distinctions between different types of lines become challenged and blurred. And yet, some lines seem to be particularly creative, i.e. especially productive. This is the case when a speculative tower – for example, 1 Undershaft, which is the tallest structure currently proposed for the City of London – keeps growing and becomes so tall that it does not fit into the visual frame of the commodified cityscape (see Figure 5). These lines do not, first and foremost, disrupt the visual order and rightness that professionals agree on. They do not resist but enlarge and implode the visibility of capital accumulation so that profit-driven building height turns against itself. Another case involves the drawing of lines for council towers that have been built outside of the City of London in the past, such as the Balfron Tower, which is a 26-storey residential building that was constructed in the 1960s as part of the Brownfield Estate in Tower Hamlets (see Figure 6). Unlike reference lines to historic and sacred structures like St Paul's that enable the construction of speculative towers, here, lines that create connections rather than distinctions between "us" and "them" are being drawn: connections between a past and a possible future; connections between speculative tower constructions and affordable housing; connections between different religions.

Drawing as a process of creating connections is an attempt not to engage in conservative, boundary-fixing representations that spur capitalist dynamics including fascism. It is an attempt that is in line with de Vries's (2014) claim that a line of flight that is not being re-captured by the state and capitalist axiomatics has the promise to avoid taking a "micro-fascistic suicidal turn" (146) when it creates mutually enhancing and life-affirming connections with other lines. Exploring connections between lines rather than drawing a line that captures everything that is coming into its reach is what drawing as an ethical practice is about.<sup>6</sup> It is a way of responding to lines that fix boundaries with lines that engage with difference, attend difference, and generate different forms of existence in a city.

Not knowing how things will play out and engaging with difference and plurality "made up of many as yet, untold, lived experiments that gesture between past, present, and future," is what Gerlach (2020) describes as ethics as "speculative affirmation" (2). Engaging with lines of speculative affirmation implies a process of drawing that is an "affirmation of possibilities" which is directed against speculation understood "as the means to an end (profit-gain)" (Gassner 2020, 133). Such a speculative aesthetics against speculative urbanization defies fascism's encapsulated creativity, which might be experienced as the "highest form of contemporary speculative representation" (Steyerl 2017) and which is fundamentally conservative because it is decoupled from systemic change.

Drawing as an ethico-political practice involves a process of discovering new lines and new connections between then and now, between here and there. In this process the

city is being destroyed, i.e. it is thought and engaged with in ways that break free from established knowledge and pre-defined moral standards. The aim is to create alternatives to a cityscape that is a violent process of exploitation, discrimination, and displacement as well as alternatives to a cityscape that is an environment for mass propaganda and violent action. Drawing a line – which is never right but which can be speculative and affirmative – means that always another line must be drawn.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See publicly available planning documents for tower developments in the City of London; especially *Environmental Statements*, which include “Townscape, Built Heritage and Visual Impact Assessments.”
- <sup>2</sup> See publicly available *Design Statements*, which are documents that are produced by architects; for example those for 1 Undershaft.
- <sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the use of the terms *horizon*, *sky-line*, and *skyline*, see Gassner 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (2016) emphasize that while the totalitarian state “does its utmost to seal all possible lines of flight, fascism is constructed on an intense line of flight” (269).
- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion of thinking versus knowing, see Arendt 1978, 2003.
- <sup>6</sup> The “sole ethical criterion,” for Deleuze and Guattari, “is the ever-increasing power [...] to form mutually enhancing or life-affirming assemblages” (Bonta and Protevi 2006, 82–83).