The Precarity of Images: Sci-fi Worldbuilding and its Uses in Agitprop

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Above

Figure 1. El Lissitzky, Proun GK, 1922.
Lissitzky’s Proun series (Project for the Affirmation of the New) blends reality and abstraction, design and painting, math and art, to create new images for a revolutionary aesthetics.
The Precarity of Images
Sci-fi Worldbuilding and its Uses in Agitprop

Noah Jodice

ABSTRACT “The Precarity of Images” examines how theories of worldbuilding common to the science fiction genre are applied to the making of agitational propaganda for liberation movements. In doing so, it questions how both explicit and implicit political images—posters, games, comics, illustrations, social media posts—either light a pathway for making a more just world or limit our ability to imagine alternate futures.

Following the ethos of Steven Jackson’s essay “Rethinking Repair,” the paper takes the “breakdown, erosion, and decay” of images as a starting point. Images change meaning over time as our cultural connections to them shift. Strategies of decoding and recoding are used to understand how these broken images are maintained or repaired.

Worldbuilding offers image-makers a sandbox in which these strategies can be tested and questioned. Drawing from speculative design practices, the paper looks at how illustration and design build on literature’s capabilities for making other futures or realities plausible enough that an audience can critically engage them. The paper unpacks exercises from activist and design communities, which act as tools to visualize our political imaginations. Building from prison abolitionist frameworks and collectives like Critical Resistance and Octavia’s Brood, the paper utilizes discursive questioning, drawing, and acts of “political looking” to decode our visual world. Self-reflections by the author provide concrete examples of how the principles in this have been explored in an illustration practice.

Pitfalls are inevitable, ranging from uneasy truces between author and audience to the economic realities of working as a contemporary illustrator. The paper uses these pitfalls as fertile ground for questions and strategies that may later reveal revolutionary truths.

“There is no reason of any sort for [the] division into artists and nonartists...The idea of “artistic work” must be abolished as a counter-revolutionary concept of what is creative and [artistic] work must be accepted as one of the functions of the living human organism in the same way as the beating of the heart or the activity of the nerve centres so that it will be afforded the same protection.”
— El Lissitzky

“Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless.”
— Walidah Imarisha

Our world is precarious. It always has been. But, some of us are noticing it now more than ever. Change—at times drifting slowly, at others punctuated and violent—is the only constant. The stable, modern future sold through capitalism has long-since cracked, revealing ever-growing patches of harm and ruin.


Visual culture is a community of assembled makers, audiences, and vectors of information exchange. Change in this community is caused by encounters with images that contaminate us—ideas, perspectives, drawings, movies, comics, zines, photographs. “Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option,” writes Anna L. Tsing in *The Mushroom at the End of the World.*

Memes collide with each other and reproduce. Illustrators draw inspiration from both each other and the past. Art Directors, creative agencies, advertisers, and social media algorithms sift images towards eyes primed to consume. At times, contaminations are dangerous, even harmful. But, they can also sew beautiful patchworks of cultural memory and experience. In a precarious world, “staying alive—for every species—requires livable collaborations. Without collaborations, we all die.”

In that spirit, let’s consider the role of images as vectors of change in our precarious world. Images are essential to making a better, more livable world. After all, drawing is an essential human act reaching back to the petroglyphs—hundreds of thousands of years old—smeared on cave walls across the world.

But what does precarity look like in visual culture? “Precarity is a state of acknowledgment of our vulnerability to others,” writes Tsing. To be precarious is to know that your footing is unstable, socially or otherwise. Acknowledging vulnerability can be a call for help from your community, or it can be a pathway to further isolation. In precarious times, it is the fundamental unknowability of what will happen which defines us. In narratives, precarity may come from a character thrust into a new situation. In images, it may be an unbalanced composition, elements put in tension with one another. Tension which reveals an energy transfer—a change—is about to take place.

Using precarity to look at visual culture uncovers how images are changing and adapting to our world. Some images break. Following the ethos of Steven Jackson’s seminal essay “Rethinking Repair,” let’s ask what happens “when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points.” A broken image may signal a meaning that no longer exists beneath its surface.

In a precarious world, cycles of repair and maintenance keep things working. What happens when we discover that maintenance is harming us rather than helping? Do we abolish old images or hack them into something new? What criteria could we develop for assessing the broken-ness of an image?

Science fiction has long provided a set of tools for asking the questions above. Across the genre’s history, writers have considered the meanings and uses of technology and progress. Sci-fi imagines worlds both vastly different and closely resembling our own. Often, the genre uses thought experiments, taking some aspect of our world to its furthest conclusion. This is true in the narratives produced by sci-fi authors, but also in the genre’s images. Worldbuilding, specifically, is a tool used by sci-fi creators to manifest their images and narratives.

If we consider images as essential to making new worlds, we should also consider the tools for making those images. Can the processes used to make illustrations—iteration, speculation, imagination, craft—be applied to understand a world of precarious images?

This essay will apply the tools of science fiction to the process of making political images. For my purposes, the “political” encompasses the ways our daily life is shaped by relationships of power and authority. The personal is


4 Tsing, 28.

5 The abolitionist Frederick Douglass considered cartoons indispensable. Remarking on the British satire magazine Punch, which helped coin the term “cartoon” in the mid-1800’s, Douglass said that the magazine was “a power more potent than Parliament” and as detested in European centers of power as “the Liberator in South Carolina.” To equate a humor magazine with one of the foremost antebellum abolitionist newspapers is power indeed. John Stauffer et al., *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century’s Most Photographed American,* Revised edition (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, A Division of W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 126.

6 Tsing, 29.


8 Take “justice” as an example. Justice in the United States is maintained by the court and legal systems. Our images of justice are closely associated with popular media which depicts those institutions: “Law & Order” or any of the numerous procedural TV Shows. But, there are other definitions. “Restorative justice” and “Transformative justice” take core ideas of justice, but apply them through other, less punitive systems. These definitions can’t be depicts with the same old forms. The image of “justice” has decayed.
the political,9 which means we must unravel the agendas of popular narratives and imagery which affect our daily lives. These agendas are present in all visual media, including literary fiction, cartoons, comics, posters, and video games. Therefore, the images discussed will include both explicit and implicit “political” ideas.

In particular, I will often turn to the contemporary prison abolition movement for visual examples, guidance, and foundational theory. This is in part because of my familiarity and recent work within the movement. But, more importantly, the abolitionist movement’s afro-futurist influences directly address the use of science fiction and visual culture in envisioning new worlds. The sci-fi writer Octavia Butler has often been cited by abolitionists as foundational to their practice. The recent anthology Octavia’s Brood, edited by adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imanisha, makes that connection explicit. Imanisha opens the book with an essay describing Butler’s impact on activists and writers of color. Butler did not want to be the lone Black female sci-fi writer. She “wanted to be one of thousands of folks writing themselves into the present and into the future.”10 Butler’s life and writing inspires what Imanisha calls “Visionary Fiction,” which includes “science fiction that has relevance towards building new, freer worlds from the mainstream science fiction... with the arc always bending towards justice.”11

Another recent work, Abolition. Feminism. Now—co-written by Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E Richie—connects abolition and visual culture directly. The visual culture of abolition is part of an “anticarceral aesthetics” which collectively “visualize[s] the regime of hetero- gendered and racialized punishment

9 The phrase’s lineage comes from black feminist movements. See The Combahee River Collective and the work of Audre Lorde as examples.
11 brown and Imanisha, 4.
that is the US prison/police state” as well as the ways that those most harmed by systems “resist in spite of all of these obstacles.”12, 13

In connecting the threads of politics, science fiction, and image-making, I am advocating for an increased self-awareness and self-criticism of the kinds of things produced by the creative class—specifically by illustrators, but extending to designers, developers, and artists. All of our work is worth critique. All of our work is political. I am not advocating for a political purity test in the practice of illustration or saying all images should be calculated for maximum political gain. That would be dull, fundamentalist, and autocratic. Absurdism, humor, romance, slice-of-life, horror, and all other forms of image-making are necessary and important. Our works are acts of care, love, and resistance.

In applying the tools of science fiction and image-making to political art, I am seeking a better understanding of how I make decisions within my work, as well as how I read and interpret the images around me. As a white artist making political work within spaces that center the criminalized, people of color, and queer communities, I find it especially pressing to root out my pre-conceived images of justice, community, safety, and progress. However, it is difficult to directly observe and critique a culture while you’re immersed in it. Those outside my own ways of thinking will find in this paper opportunities for welcome critique. For image-makers who do not produce explicitly political work, this essay can be a reminder to center self-awareness and reflectiveness. We’ll look at specific exercises for analyzing images, explore practices of close looking, and delve into the roots of worldbuilding.

Who Makes an “Image”?

Following the work of Hans Belting, I am creating an informal distinction between “image” and “picture.” An image exists as a concept in our minds, while a picture is the image bounded by a physical construct. We could imagine the memory of a friend’s face (the image) and a photograph of the friend (the picture). Though I won’t adhere strictly to this definition, I will primarily use the word “image” because it refers to a multiplicity of possibilities and existences. Consider all the ways we could draw our friend’s face to remember it, each suggesting a different part of what makes them real.14

Image-making, then, is the process illustrators, designers, and other creative workers use to encode meaning and value into an artifact. The image or concept is given a physical or digital form. The form could be a poster, a comic, a web page, an app—the list goes on. This form is then transmitted by a vector of information exchange—pasted on a wall, printed and bound in a book, posted on a social media platform, sent through email—and decoded by an audience. Creative workers construct meaning using the tools of aesthetics, which we’ll explore further soon.

The image-maker is a member of the creative class, which also includes information and systems designers, web developers, writers, and many other forms of creative labor. Tech companies and social media platforms have begun lumping much of this labor under the umbrella of “content creation,” but it is important that we resist the devaluing of creative production into content. Two necessary tools in that resistance are awareness of our own labor and consciousness of our class. Collaboration and contamination place power back in our hands.

I use the terms “encoding” and “decoding” above

14 vapp2010, Prof. Hans Belting. An Anthropology of Images or Iconology – Part 1, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7LWGKQXOxM.
15 See also the work of W.J.T. Mitchell, including “The Surplus Value of Images” and “What do Pictures Really Want?”
with a specific intention. Image-making is a form of coding, one developed long before the advent of computing. The creative class is a part of the “hacker class,” a designation coined by media theorist McKenzie Wark. She has written about a post-capitalist power dynamic, wherein a “hacker class” and “vectoralist class” produce and control flows of information. In her 2004 book, *A Hacker Manifesto*, Wark writes:

“Hackers create the possibility of new things entering the world. Not always great things, or even good things, but new things. In art, in science, in philosophy and culture, in any production of knowledge where data can be gathered, where information can be extracted from it, and where in that information new possibilities for the world are produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old.”

The vectoralist class, on the other hand, consists of those who control the flow of that new, hacked information. Vectoralists might include entrepreneurs, social media CEOs, media influencers, and other hackers who produce new vectors. Many working illustrators using Adobe Illustrator may already have an understanding of the power and precision of vectors. Vectors are pathways originating at a single point and extending outward with a particular magnitude in any direction. Wark is applying the concept to information, rather than graphic images. Hackers may work in tandem with or against the vectorial class. The reduction of visual culture into integers of content magnifies the power of the Vectoral Class.

Understanding ourselves as “hackers” of images is key to seeing our visual world as both precarious and changeable. By encoding images with value, we further propagate and populate the world around us. While an audience can interpret an image in a wide variety of ways,

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the values coded into the image direct the audience’s attention. Therefore, those values must be critiqued.

How and why do we choose particular symbols to illustrate our ideas? What codes are we reproducing? In the production of visual information, image-makers produce artifacts of culture. More accurately, they fix a particular cultural value into an object (an image into a picture). In doing so they might usurp, complicate, rearrange, or codify that value.

Uneasy Truces

Narratives in political art promise change—they herald it, will it into being, or denounce it. Promises, though, only carry weight when we can guarantee that the person promising us will have the power to enforce their will in the future.” Here, now, those futures are changing. Who makes political art, who sees it, and who owns it are questions that deserve further exploration. This essay focuses on the art itself, using author, audience, and ownership as lenses for making meaning.

There are uneasy truces and rocky terrains here. Gaps always open between imagination and reality. The goal of this essay is to traverse that terrain, using acts of looking to better understand how and why imaginative work can inform material change. Here, let’s name some of those uneasy truces.

There is the tension between theory and practice. In illustration, we could call these “aesthetics” and “utility,” respectively. Aesthetics is the way an image looks. Utility describes how the thing is used by people—it’s function. Is it for entertainment, education, advertising? Perhaps it is an “art object” with no other function. The principles of aesthetics are in tension within every image: think of the way contrast, hierarchy, balance, composition, negative space, etc. pull against each other. Aesthetics and utility both carry meaning and influence one another.

Next, we can consider the truce between author and audience. In the modernist view of image-making, the author makes meaning with an image and the audience receives that meaning through the image. A postmodern viewpoint renegotiates the truce, placing the audience at the center of interpretation, while the image changes with the context of its interpreter. Now, we might be negotiating a new treaty, where image, author, and audience have

17 This is an explicit, often state-based political power. In the United States it takes the form of electoral politics, which often operates using promises made outside the legislative, judicial, or executive chambers. Even among those who idealize it, electoral politics can’t help but bleed into personal, implicit politics.

the same time, we cannot rely on a future utopia to save us. In Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*, George Orr is a man whose dreams can change reality. Yet, he recognizes the dangers of one person’s utopic ideals at the cost of others’ futures. He flips the well-known adage that “the end justifies the means.” “What if there is no end?” Orr asks. “All we have is means.”

The uneasy truces here are fraught, but they are the only means we have. Collectively, political image-makers must navigate multiple relationships at once to envision useful futures—ones that are both concrete and spectacular. As the next section discusses, the tension in these relationships can actually form the base for effective political agitation.

**The Uses of Agitprop**

“Propaganda” is a term thrown around by those on every part of the political spectrum. It usually describes any bit of information that comes from the group you disagree with, especially if that group has power. Twitter bots are propaganda. Press releases are propaganda. Advertising is propaganda. These claims may be true, but they are relatively useless in understanding how propaganda is made and used. Let’s nuance the term by re-introducing “agitprop” or “agitational propaganda.” Agitprop is a form of expressive storytelling that unsettles the audience and asks them to consider the systematic construction of the world around them. While state actors often employ propaganda to quell resistance, enforce surveillance, and maintain the status quo, agitprop is often a tool of people’s movements aiming to do just the opposite.

How can we distinguish between the two? “Agitation can be distinguished from propaganda by the fact that it excites the feelings of the audience and readers and has a direct influence on their will,” writes Anatolii Lunacharsky in “Revolution and Art.”

Agitprop creates tension and encourages reflection. Propaganda, on the other hand, asks for consumption and manufactures consent. Cold, heartless propaganda quells, but agitprop excites.

Classic examples of agitprop come from the Constructivist art movement during the Russian Revolution, but we might also look to the Atelier Populaire in France, the Zapatista movement, indigenous people’s movements in North America, or the modern-day prison abolition movement. Electoral campaigns and organizers produce heaps of posters, flyers, postcards, and social media collateral aimed to excite voters. Anywhere people seek change, agitational propaganda is sure to be there.

Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright and Marxist, argued that theater was a powerful tool for agitation. In developing the mode of the “Epic Theater,” Brecht’s plays aimed to alienate the audience and prevent them from becoming submerged in the theater-going experience. He calculated breaks in the fourth wall, had actors directly address the audience, and used placards to explicate his scenes. These devices, alongside narrative, would force the audience to consider their own reality while watching the play. Brecht writes:

“Our theatre must encourage the thrill of comprehension and train people in the pleasure of changing reality. Our audiences must not only hear how Prometheus was set free, but also train themselves in the pleasure of freeing him. They must be taught to feel, in our theatre, all the satisfaction and enjoyment felt by the inventor and the discoverer, all the triumph felt by the liberator.”

The core tenet of Brechtian theory is that theater can be a tool both for pleasure and for productive conflict. Successful agitprop uses the same tenet when considering how aesthetic principles challenge the audience.

In Ernst Fischer’s 1978 book, *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach*, the theorist lays out a modernist argument for art’s agitational social function. Fischer’s concern is that the images of an old world still hold too much sway in an emerging, modern world. He points to—white, male—artists whose work was breaking new ground: Pablo Picasso, Charlie Chaplin, James Joyce, Bertolt Brecht, Vladimir Mayakovsky and others. Fischer claims that these artists, working in a variety of fields both explicitly and implicitly political, were discovering “new

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21 Certainly, agitation can also be used against liberatory movements—we can see examples in all kinds of racist, nationalist, or fascist propaganda.
23 We can see now that Brecht leaned too heavily on the authority of artist over audience. The audience “hears” and is “taught,” though they must “train” themselves. Critics have pointed out that Brecht’s plays were enjoyed by the bourgeoisie, but it is hard to calculate how successful his attempts at training liberators were. More recent practices balance the power dynamic. Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed,” for example, draws on Paulo Freire’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to activate the audience directly.
Agitation leads to action, which leads to coalitions. Sometimes, those coalitions dissolve in the precarity of political world-building.

In writing and drawing “The Remnants,” the comic which is the other half of my MFA thesis, I was managing several uneasy truces. The story focuses on Remi, a 20–something who is frustrated with her repetitive job. She travels to fragments of broken worlds to remove “contaminants” (mushrooms which keep springing up). Her micromanaging robot boss tells her that her work will help re-establish the human species—putting things back the way they were before two galaxies collided and fractured societies and planets. Agitation comes in the form of a spore-spreading deer spirit, and Remi learns that it was human greed and the promise of perpetual growth that led to this catastrophe. The mushrooms she’s been removing are sentient and have a society of their own, and Remi is complicit in its destruction.

I worried about succumbing to “main character syndrome,” where the audience gives too much empathy to the protagonist and loses sight of the system the story is critiquing. A main character was useful, but I needed to trouble the hero’s journey structure that coming-of-age narratives often have. Rather than finding her purpose, Remi loses it. She starts the story lonely and finds connection through the sentient mushrooms. But, they shun her for the harm she has caused. The two groups form a coalition of necessity to liberate themselves and the deer spirit from Remi’s robot boss, but the story concludes with the mushrooms and deer spirit following their own paths. Remi is left to contemplate her place and purpose in the harmful system that she’s maintained.

situations characteristic of our time,” to “build up a supply of new, powerful, unhackneyed images.”

But Fischer misses one of Modernism’s deeply rooted flaws: Its unwavering commitment to artists of “genius” whose work rose to dominate hegemonic power structures. Try to find a history of art that doesn’t mention Picasso or a film studies history that doesn’t screen Chaplin. The “new images” of 1959 are now our hackneyed histories. Still, we can find value in the quest to overturn the old worlds we’ve inherited. Fischer contributes a useful phrase to this quest: the “world picturebook.”

He argues that ground-breaking modernists, whether socialist in orientation or not, are forming a new world picturebook, a catalog of images which comprise our visual imaginations.

The agitational work at the core of the contemporary abolition movement decenters the “genius” and traditional power structures. Instead, it centers those who have been most harmed in our communities—criminalized individuals, survivors of sexual assault, political prisoners, and those constantly surveilled by the police state. Most of these folks are people of color, indigenous people, members of the LGBTQIA* community, and other marginalized groups. The prison abolition movement that gained steam in the 1990’s was led and developed by members of these groups. For instance, Critical Resistance was a 3500-person conference organized in 1998 by Angela Davis, Cassandra Shaylor, and a host of other activists and academics. Davis

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25 Fischer, 203.
et al. write that the conference “marked the beginning of an entirely new phase of anti-prison activism.” Key to the conference’s organization was participation by and with those currently incarcerated, which involved technological adaptations and planning so that they could be indirectly present. “Because people in prison had generated much of the knowledge that enabled the formation of this movement to abolish imprisonment, such a conference would be seriously lacking without their direct participation.”

Though this particular conference was well-documented, the work of many smaller organizations, political actions, and communities has not been. Often, images are all that is left. “Posters of convenings...snapshots of people gathered...images of people at actions. The grammar and the genealogy of abolition and feminism thus sometimes rely on visual fragments and artifacts...” With only a few visual artifacts to reconstruct our activist pasts, we should be cognizant of how our current images might remember us. The visual world of political movements, then, should reflect the core interests and values of the people.

What does a world that reflects these interests look like? Walidah Imarisha writes in *Octavia’s Brood* that many of the anthology’s contributors were not science fiction writers by trade. “Most were hesitant to commit, feeling like they weren’t qualified.” But, once given the time and support to nourish their ideas, they created works of visionary fiction which challenged the norms of the genre. The anthology is inspired by Butler, a “qualified” writer, but is made whole by a host of people with different qualifications and kinds of expertise.

Turning to the visual, Nicole Fleetwood’s 2020 curatorial project *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* celebrates the “new images” made by folks who have spent significant time within the carceral state. In her book about the project, Fleetwood introduces us to a painting by Ronnie Goodman—San Quentin Arts in Corrections Art Studio, 2008 (Figure 6). The painting portrays the artist, alone in his studio, surrounded by his work (portraits of friends, landscapes, still lifes), his tools, and the work of friends. Fleetwood writes that “the prison studio...is a place of imaginative possibility as well as a place constrained by [Goodman’s] incarceration and the layered history of the carceral state.” The prison studio constitutes the entirety of his world picturebook. It is both limited and rich. Goodman’s values are on display through his images:

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26 Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, 38.
27 Davis et al., 46.
28 Davis et al., 49.
community, creativity, freedom. In his interview with the author, Goodman says about the composition of the painting: “I fixed certain things the way I wanted it done.”

Looking back further, we can see a shining example of effective agitational images in the work of Emory Douglas. Douglas was the “Minister of Culture” and “Revolutionary Artist” for the Black Panther Party, where he edited and art directed the party’s richly illustrated newspaper “The Black Panther.” (Figures 7, 8) One of the most successful agitprop artists of the Black Power movement, he summed up the connection between community and art-making in his “Position Paper #1 on Revolutionary Art”: “The People are the backbone to the Artist and not the Artist to the People.” He continues:

“To conceive any type of visual interpretations of the struggle, the Revolutionary Artist must constantly be agitating the people, but before one agitates the people as the struggle progresses one must make strong roots among the masses of the people. Then and only then can a Revolutionary Artist renew the visual interpretation of Revolutionary Art indefinitely until liberation.”

An effective world picturebook must come from and be constituted by the communities it will represent. In fact, Douglas’ first experience at a print shop was while he was incarcerated in a juvenile detention center. By portraying his community as it saw itself, Douglas created an agitational agenda that reflected and empowered the community’s own desires for change. Along the way, he illustrated striking images inspired by the language of comic book halftones and woodblock printing. Colette Gaiter writes that Douglas upended the “voyeuristic and patronizing” ways that poor people were often portrayed, especially after the dominance of a social realism embodied by the 1940’s-era Works Progress Administration. The material gains of the Black Panther Party—its community-centered, free education programs and massively-successful free meal programs—were drivers of real change in the Party’s communities. But, it was the agitational art spread by Douglas and others that opened pathways for change—pathways which continue to inspire revolutionary artists around the globe.

Next, we will explore the tools of science fiction—specifically the practice of worldbuilding—to understand its potential within agitprop. With that framing in mind, let’s take a closer look at the practice of worldbuilding.
ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE
What is “Worldbuilding”?  
To understand how images construct worlds of imagination, we can look closely at the practice of worldbuilding in science fiction. A “world” in science fiction might be a singular planet, a galaxy, a whole universe, or a single vessel in the vast reaches of space. The author determines how much of this world we see. Worldbuilding is a truce between author and audience. The author shows the audience pieces of a fictional world to gain their buy-in. Rules are set out for the world—Is time travel possible? Are there aliens? Do humans exist?—which the audience expects to be kept. We don’t need to believe a story could literally happen, but we do need to see it as plausible.11

Authors take different approaches to building their worlds. N.K. Jemison writes that she usually begins with characters and general ideas for a story, with no solid plot. Eventually, she might write what she calls a “proof of concept” short story, which doesn’t involve the primary characters or plot at all. Instead, it is another story from the same universe. Jemison writes that these stories “[test] the worldbuilding to see if it’s complete enough to support a novel yet. Often the act of writing the story helps me catch glaring holes in my worldbuilding.”12 Ursula K. Le Guin preferred a another approach, inventing words and places that have not yet been explored. Then, she brings her characters to them. For her Earthsea novels, she drew a map of the world’s islands before ever writing about them. Le Guin writes that building these images helps the writer “believe in’ the world she is creating, not in the sense of confusing it in any way with the actual bodily world, but in the sense of giving absolute credence to the work of the imagination—dwelling in it while writing, and trusting it to reveal itself.”13

Octavia Butler’s worldbuilding is notable because it focuses on relationships. She rarely takes the conventional sci-fi approach to a setting. She makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Butler’s short story Bloodchild brings us to an alien world with a human colony, but uses the lenses of body horror and reproductive politics. Kindred explores the familiar/strange in the past, as Butler’s protagonist is thrust backwards and forward in time to experience both the violence of slavery and contemporary America. Butler’s stories are often deeply sensual and embodied, from the body-swapping eroticism of Wild Seed to the uses of love for survival in Parable of the Sower. Her worlds are rarely explicitly political—she does not call for certain candidates or policies—but these deeply human qualities fill her worlds with a politics of being. She juxtaposes and tests ideas. She explores the opportunities and threats that change brings.

Worldbuilding is essential to political image-making because, as Leah Zaidi writes, it is a form of “social constructivism.”14 It is a sandbox in which authors can test systems and ask how we might improve them. What happens to a character when a specific rule set or condition is applied? We don’t have to know all the answers to how the world works, but exploring a few can show us how political ideologies get transferred back into small-scale, everyday situations.

In their book Speculative Everything, designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby use worldbuilding to challenge their field’s penchant for optimism and progress. They advocate for a speculative design practice which open[s] up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create new spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people’s imaginations to flow freely.”15

One aspect of this practice is building “props”—similar to those used on movie sets—that come from other realities. These props “facilitate imagining” and are not products for use in our world. Because they are “at odds with how things are,” they can encourage speculation about other realities and purposes beyond our own imaginations.16 Such objects are akin to Jemison’s “proof of concept” stories, except without the eventual character-driven narrative which Jemison is building towards. Without narrative, a speculative design is “the story of an idea.”16 Dunne and Raby point to Dougal Dixon’s 1981 work “After Man: A Zoology of the Future” as an example. Dixon’s text and illustrations explore a world fifty-million years in the future, where speculative creatures have evolved in a post-human landscape. Dunne and Raby write that, by exploring the causes of each creature’s evolution, the author’s worldbuilding “guides us toward the system itself and the interconnectedness of climate, plant, and

39 Dunne and Raby, Speculative Everything, 2.
40 Dunne and Raby, 92.
41 Dunne and Raby, 76.
animal.” It de-centers the human as protagonist to both question our place in the system and create other speculative narratives.

Tsing makes a similar move in her chapter “The Life of the Forest” from The Mushroom at the End of the World. She asks: “Can I show landscape as the protagonist of an adventure in which humans are only one kind of participant?” The chapter follows organisms and patterns of assemblage. Local landscapes become strange worlds of nematodes and fungal growths. Environmental changes such as floods and drought shape the landscape, as “disturbance opens the terrain for transformative encounters.”

The chapter is not convincing as a landscape-only narrative and Tsing still relies on human histories to build her case. But, much like Dixon, she succeeds in using worldbuilding to point us towards systems operating through “unintentional design.”

In contrast with the agitprop of the previous section, the worlds here are often implicitly political. After all, there is a danger in allowing political aims to fully colonize the imaginative process. Real-world politics don’t begin with ideological platforms. They grow out of concrete problems that need solving and harms that need addressing. Le Guin insists that “an ideological purpose produces a sermon, or satire (which is not fantasy, and has very different standards of plausibility, since it is a mirror held up to actual life).” Sermons and satires have uses, but what we’re aiming for is something more convincing and moving—something filled with a politics of being because it is deeply related to our lives.

Propaganda has an uneasy place in worldbuilding. Often, propagandistic sci-fi narratives devolve into either unavoidable catastrophes or promised-land utopias. This may happen because the balance between author and audience is lopsided. Perhaps the audience hasn’t been given enough credit in helping to build the world. Dunne and Raby write that viewers of speculative images must “show how it is possible to avoid disaster: but these works must be real, they must not be trimmed to propagandist aims.”

Worldbuilding, as we have seen, is not a one-way, tried-and-true process. It is a patchwork of iterations. In the context of political image-making, the goal is to provide enough detail that the audience can begin to visualize another reality for themselves. Traditional design problem-solving presents a single, expert answer to a difficult problem. Speculative image-making uses worldbuilding techniques to disturb our reality and suggest a multiplicity of futures.

Worldbuilding in Practice—Two Examples

The designer and educator Alix Gerber uses a method of worldbuilding and speculative design in her teaching. In one workshop, participants fill out a sheet that asks them to identify values their world prioritizes. Trends or ideas associated with that value are noted, and participants label the value along several spectra. Does it feel soft or hard? Solitary or communal? Colorful or desaturated?

Participants then imagine a world that prioritizes that value, identifying potential outcomes. Finally, they’re asked to draw, in increasing specificity, how a particular task would be accomplished with this prioritized value. For example, in a world that prioritizes rest, how would people obtain shelter? Participants draw the activity in comic form and then zoom in on a particular panel, visualizing where the activity takes place, who does it, and how.

This exercise takes the key tenets of worldbuilding and applies them to visionary drawing and storytelling practices. Much like in science fiction, a concept from our world is taken to its logical conclusion and then elaborated upon. Here, though, the goal is to understand how that value could be built into our own reality.

Another exercise comes from the zine Against Punishment, published by Project NIA and Interrupting Criminalization, and authored by the prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba. In the exercise “Another World Is Possible,” Kaba “invites participants to reflect on a world without policing and prisons through storytelling.” There are four parts within the exercise: initial visualization, reading together, and two creative activities. Though each part provides useful insight into our subject, we’ll focus here

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42 Dunne and Raby, 77.
43 Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World, 155.
44 Tsing, 160.
45 Tsing, 160.
46 Ursula K. Le Guin, “Plausibility in Fantasy.”
Above

Figure 9. Mobius Digital, *Outer Wilds*, (Annapurna Interactive, 2019). Games can be an interactive form of worldbuilding, whether they are open-world explorations or closely-plotted narratives. *Outer Wilds* takes the concept literally. The player explores a solar system that collapses every 22 minutes when the sun turns into a supernova. The player's goal is to understand why the collapse occurs and unravel the quantum physics of their universe. Apocalypse is inevitable, but it is not the end. After bringing together stranded characters from around the solar system, the player travels to the Eye of the Universe, and discovers that all the universe’s stars are at the end of their lives. Within the Eye, a new big bang is forming. Characters sit around a campfire, creating a new universe by telling stories and playing music together.
on visualization, since it is foundational to worldbuilding practices in image-making. To begin, the facilitator asks participants to “remember a time when you felt safe.”

“Who was with you? What was around you? What were you doing?” the facilitator asks. “What did this feeling of safety look like? Smell like? Taste like? Sound like?” Finally the facilitator asks “How do you remember feeling?” The prompts make use of worldbuilding techniques which focus on the senses. Instead of imagining a future, these techniques help to reconstruct past memories. Next, participants are asked to make a list of moments when they felt safe, and choose one to thoroughly describe. After doing so, they are asked “when you thought of safety, did you think of cop cars, prisons, jails, bars on windows, guns, ADT security signs, gates?” Often, people don’t cite such images as part of their visualization. Instead, they remember things like “community, being with family, sitting around a table full of food, music, nature, feeling love, laughter, having our needs met.”

Let’s pause for a moment to consider how those two lists operate as images. The first list includes many concrete, iconographic objects. We can easily draw guns, jail bars, security signage, and gates. Illustrators and designers are especially concerned with clarity—a principle which asks how quickly the viewer understands what you are showing them. Guns and jails aren’t bad images, but their focus on clarity comes with a price. This form of “safety” has a well-defined “world picturebook,” as Fischer would put it. Images of guns and jails reduce the complex idea of safety to an easily digestible, but narrow, form. Meanwhile, the second list consists of complex relationships between people. They are more difficult to draw. What does “having our needs met” or “feeling love” look like? Certainly, we can see mental images: a hug, a cartoon heart, groceries or a home or a bed to sleep in. These images are useful, but they are also less quickly interpreted than a gun or jail bars. We can see how illustrators might reach for the images with more clarity, because they get the job done efficiently. But, they’re also more limiting. A complex image opens up multiplicities of meaning. Kaba’s exercise points out the discrepancy between what we want from “safety” and what it usually looks like.

Back in the exercise, the facilitator asks: “what is safety?” Can we name the objects and images in our vision? The order of the exercise is intentional. If the facilitator started by asking whether we need police to feel safe or prisons to keep criminals from hurting others, participants would opt for their usual political worldview. The exercise invites participants to build a world of images and then interpret that world’s meaning. As we previously explored, starting from real experiences helps us avoid overtly propagandistic sermonizing. The speculative approach trusts participants with their own exploration, while guiding them towards understanding.

The other three parts of the exercise ask participants to do the concrete work of imagining what safety looks like. They read “Justice,” a short story written by Kaba, which tells of a “Small Place” where peace-holders help to resolve disagreement and harm through practices of transformative justice. After exploring questions of utopia and vengeance, participants are asked to write a story of their own, which would center their vision of safety.

Gerber’s and Kaba’s exercises employ many of the same techniques. Both use visualization processes to explore thematic ideas, rather than imposing themes upon a world. Both center the participant rather than the facilitator. Together, they constitute a method of applying worldbuilding to the process of making images. People who aren’t “qualified,” as Imarisha would say, imagine realities through broad ideas and specific details. They rely on their own experiences, rather than norms. The result is something both new and specific. What if illustrators and designers took a similar approach in composing their own work? How could we explore the worlds of our projects before settling into defined images? We might find that

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50 Kaba, 22.
51 Kaba, 22.
52 When an Earth Visitor comes to Small Place, she can’t understand how it operates without jails or prisons to keep bad people away. The narrator and residents explain their process, which centers harmed individuals. Earth Visitor can’t accept this reality and murders the narrator. The narrator’s family and the community ask the Earth Visitor to join their trust circle in mourning, celebration, and forms of healing. Earth Visitor is asked to take the place of their victim in the community, rather than be imprisoned or exiled. Mariame Kaba, Tamara K. Nopper, and Naomi Murakawa, We Do This ’til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice, Abolitionist Papers (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 157.
I find myself re-using the same ideas over and over again. When working with activists and organizers, certain images seem indispensable. Bars represent jails. Broken chains mean freedom. If I want you to see a judge, I use a black robe and gavel. The concept of “change” might look like a group of people holding signs at a protest or flowers blooming in spring. But do these symbols help or hurt my intended meanings? Does relying on images of oppression help an audience understand the world around them or continue to submerge them in it? Certainly the approach and intention helps. I can avoid images of “trauma porn,” where characters’ grief and misery is displayed for the audience simply to make them understand that “life is bad for this person.”

Working on a recent project about criminal courts in the United States, a group of collaborators and I ran into a different kind of problem. The initial plan had been to tell the story of a fictionalized woman of color going through the criminal justice system as a way to explain how the system is designed to produce cycles of harm. We avoided the pitfalls of trauma porn, but found ourselves locked into a narrative problem. Narratives often focus on a main character, and they point the audience towards a particular question: “how can this character survive and find meaning within their story?” But, the question we were trying to ask is “how is the system designed to create these stories over and over again?” If the character overcomes their struggle, the audience doesn’t have to feel complicit in the system. If the character doesn’t overcome, the audience can see this as a tragedy, but one which is too large for them to comprehend or fix. The solution, after talking to survivors of the system, other activists, and trusted mentors, was twofold. First, turn the bulk of our project into an “explainer” which leaves out character-driven narrative. Instead, we would use an “illusion” and “reality” dynamic that breaks down parts of the criminal court system. Second, acknowledge the use of narrative stories as an entrypoint that, especially for newcomers to the issue, can agitate folks to become more involved. We’re still working on the second part, with the understanding that we still have a ways to go. Both approaches require self-reflection and critical perception of the images and worlds we are building.
our imaginations are actually quite narrow. We should now turn to the meaning of that narrowness and explore how our imaginations comprise their own worlds.

**The Box of Imagination**

Despite what public library posters and TED talks tell you, there are limits to what we can imagine. Your limits are different from mine, because the world of images we inhabit and the experiences we’ve had are different. We might call these limits your “box of imagination.” The term is adapted from adrienne maree brown’s book *Emergent Strategy*, where she describes feeling trapped inside “someone else’s imagination.”

Many possible futures are contained within your box, but you didn’t make it all by yourself. The narrative structure of the hero’s journey, for example, forces a few possible outcomes. If a story challenges the typical ending—the hero returns triumphant from their quest, having changed—we either feel delighted or cheated. But, our box of imagination has been enlarged.

brown writes that she cannot fully exist in a world defined by a white supremacist imagination—one that can conceive of police officers justly murdering someone, but not of accountability for the same officers. The “box of imagination” concept can help us explore the edges of our own imaginations or challenge other’s imagined worlds. Seeing this box, we can then use narratives, actions, and community-based strategies to start getting unstuck.

Narrative science fiction and worldbuilding exercises can be powerful tools for expanding or escaping your box, because they operate as a series of “what if’s” which disrupt teleological, predetermined outcomes. In *Octavia’s Brood*, Imarisha writes that “once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless.”

Paulo Freire, in his 1970 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, examines his theory of how people can come to acknowledge the limits of their reality and then practice surpassing them. He grounds this theory in “limit-situations.” Freire argues that most people, especially those who are oppressed by regimes of white supremacy, are submerged in reality. Their “real consciousness” is limited by the oppressor’s box of imagination. Limit-situations are instances where an individual comes up against the edge of their submerged consciousness, where cracks start to show and they are confronted with something which makes them respond differently to how they otherwise would. Contrary to previous theorists who saw limit-situations as endpoints, Freire says that they are “the real boundaries where all possibilities begin.”

Stephen Jackson agrees, writing that it is “in moments of breakdown that we learn to see and engage our technologies in new and sometimes surprising ways.” In the limit-situation, we find the edges of our box. In acknowledging the breakdown that occurs in these moments, we can more successfully hack out a new solution.

To do so, we need critical self-perception. Otherwise, individuals confronted with a limit-situation fall into “fatalism.”

As critical perception is embodied in action,” Freire writes, “a climate of hope and confidence develops which leads men to attempt to overcome the limit-situations.” In Freire’s work, the goal of the facilitator or co-educator is to travel with an individual into a greater critical perception. We can apply a similar construct to the work of image-makers. The poster, comic, or other visual artifact acts as a stimulus, meant to dislodge the viewer from their present reality and allow them space to question themselves. In effect, to agitate them. Much as Brecht suggests that Epic Theatre can expose the audience to the joy of liberation, a speculative approach to image-making can agitate the audience into an analysis of their world.

When we make these images, we have to acknowledge that audiences will interpret them differently. For instance, while one viewer can be pushed towards productive political action by a poster, another might become more entrenched in opposing that action. In the section “Political Looking,” we will explore several approaches to interpreting images which can prevent this kind of fracturing.

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54 brown, 18.
56 brown and Imarisha, *Octavia’s Brood*, 4.
60 Freire, 99.
The Precarity of Images

Above
Figure 11. Ronald Wimberly, panel from “Do or Die,” August 31, 2020. The full comic was supposed to run in The New York Times as part of a series of diary comics. After deliberation, the editors pulled it because they determined this panel was “editorializing violence.” Instead, Wimberly posted the comic to his Patreon page. It was also published through The Nib, which publishes political and nonfiction comics both online and in print.


At Left
Figure 12. Eleanor Davis, page from The Hard Tomorrow, 2019. Davis’ graphic novel explores hope and despair through a new family grappling with a precarious world. Davis extrapolates from the present to a near future where Mark Zuckerberg is president, drones surveil civilians, and protests are quickly shut down by militarized police forces.


At Right
Figure 13. Michael DeForge, excerpt from “Recommended for You” in his comics collection Heaven No Hell, . The comic illustrates a self-reflective, political form of worldbuilding. The narrator is a friend telling us about a TV show they have been binge-watching. The show, “Day of Reckoning: The Sinning Hours: The Series,” is about a world similar to the one in the “The Purge” movie series, in which, one day a year, there are no laws. DeForge plays with the way media narrativize political conflict and change. The comic medium allows him space to “test” the TV show and explore the possibilities of a world unchained from punishment and incarceration. The show progresses from outright, depraved violence to anarchistic community-building. People begin to take care for each other out of common human need rather than the state’s imposition of security through violence.

Michael DeForge, Heaven No Hell, First edition (Montréal, Québec: Drawn & Quarterly, 2021).

The Political Worlds of Comics
Three Recent Examples
There's one episode that's all about a free, 24-hour-long marathon welding class this welder decides to hold in a park. All these welding noobs get super into welding after attending.

That woman who played Wave Killer Z has a cameo as the welder. She really gets to show her range.

People start petting other people's animals.

Bullies are allowed to be nice to Pipsqueaks. The Pipsqueaks and bullies start new, experimental extracurricular clubs together and end up inventing a sport called "Non-Competitive Blubble."
Political Looking

The practice of “political looking” is an adaptation—a useful contamination—of “political listening.” Cited in Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, the term comes from the work of Beverly Brown. Brown, an organizer in the Pacific Northwest, helped mushroom foragers from diverse communities find commonality in their differences. She did so through conversations and intentional listening. Brown, Tsing writes, advocated for a “political listening,” which allows you to “detect the traces of not-yet-articulated common agendas.” Political listening “suggests that any gathering contains many inchoate political futures and that political work consists of helping some of those come into being.” Tsing contrasts this intentional listening with a contemporary meeting between forest service agents and local mushroom pickers from diverse Khmer, Lao, Mien, and Guatemalan communities. What starts with “lively repartee” soon devolves into the forest service officials explaining elaborate rule sets, which are then translated into the various native tongues of those present. A political listening foregrounds the act of struggle instead of quick progress.

We can apply a similar methodology, through acts of noticing the world around us, to a political form of looking. Like in Freire, Gerber, or Kaba’s examples, this might include acts of observing and of making. Drawing requires both observing the not-yet-known and articulating it through line, shape, and form. Political looking has no hard-and-fast rules. Instead, image-makers should sit with the idea, apply it to their own visual world, and notice the results. What are we looking for? “At best...a most ephemeral glimmer,” Tsing writes. “But, living with indeterminacy, such glimmers are the political.”

Let’s examine two approaches for noticing the glimmer: the act of “decoding” and the act of “recoding” our visual world.

Decoding

The first act, “decoding,” is inspired by Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. We previously encountered Freire’s work as a way to examine “limit-situations” in our imaginative worlds. In Chapter 3, Freire leads the reader through a process by which facilitators can organize a program of education within local communities they do not initially belong to. The goal is for local community members to understand their own world, rather than allowing outside “experts” to lecture or instruct them on their own lives.

The initial phase of a program involves investigators (both consenting, paid community members and outside facilitators) “decoding” an area of interest by closely observing moments of life within it. Sketches and photographs are made, informal conversations are had, and notes are taken. An “evaluation meeting” is then held, where the “unique living code” is discussed by participants who write and talk about what they have experienced. The process values embodied experiences over hard data.

As each investigator “relates how [they] perceived or felt a certain occurrence or situation, [their] exposition challenges all the other decoders by re-presenting to them the same reality upon which they have themselves been intent.”

This process of presenting and re-presenting adds nuance to the living code, while also exposing its structure. “The more the group divide and re-integrate the whole, the more closely they approach the nuclei of the principal and secondary contradictions which involve the inhabitants of the area. By locating these nuclei of contradictions, the investigators might even at this stage be able to organize the program content of their educational action.” Freire’s aim is an educational program for literacy or some other hard skill, but we can explore a similar methodology with the end goal of image-making. A group of community-members, sent out into their world with pencil and paper, could use these methods to decipher their own “unique living code.”

The politics inherent in this form of looking are not propagandistic, but they are agitational. To contaminate Emory Douglas’ assertion, the people become the artists, backbone and all.

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62 Tsing, 254.
63 Tsing, 255.
Recoding

A second approach to political looking is the practice of “recoding.” As defined here, it is inspired by the work of Shannon Mattern and Stephen Jackson, who have written about acts of repair and maintenance in our material world. “Recoding” could also be termed a repair or maintenance of images, wherein some aspect of the original image is kept, while a key piece of it is re-worked or fixed to create something new. Mattern writes in “Maintenance and Care” that “to study maintenance is itself an act of maintenance.” 67 A political looking focused on spotting acts of maintenance renews the cycle, exposes cracks in the code, and presents opportunities for us to hack something new.

Jackson writes that repair constitutes “acts of care by which order and meaning in complex sociotechnical systems are maintained and transformed, human value is preserved and extended, and the complicated work of fitting to the varied circumstances of organizations, systems, and lives is accomplished.” 68 We can think of image-makers as workers fitting together pieces of code which repair and maintain systems of meaning. There is immense labor done to create, disseminate, and consume a world of images that appears seamless. Jackson borrows the concept of “articulation work” from Susan Leigh Starr and Anselm Strauss. 69 Articulation is “the art of fitting” together through small acts that maintain the seamless motion experienced by users and viewers. But the motion only appears seamless on its surface.

Consider the workings of a global social media platform like Facebook, where content moderators act as image-makers maintaining the site’s seamlessness. In 2019, Facebook employed or contracted around 15,000 content moderators, whose job it is to sift through every image, video, or piece of text flagged for violating community standards. These moderators watch violent images all day long, suffer from severe PTSD, and work in a heavily surveilled environment that keeps them as efficient as possible. Little time is given for bathroom breaks, meals, or mental health services. A blog post from Facebook’s Vice President of Operations states that Facebook hires moderators based on their “ability to deal with violent imagery.” That violent imagery has a destructive effect on the people who watch it. The rules for maintaining the moderation system are complex and ever-changing. Casey Newton writes for The Verge that “each post presents [a moderator] with two separate but related tests. First, he must determine whether a post violates the community standards. Then, he must select the correct reason why it violates the standards. If he accurately recognizes that a post should be removed, but selects the “wrong” reason, this will count against his accuracy score.” Low accuracy results in termination. 70 Jackson asks: “Can the fixer know and see different things—indeed, different worlds—than the better-known figures of “designer” or “user”? 71 In the case of Facebook, the answer is a critical and harmful “yes.”

Facebook’s content moderation is a great example of how maintenance can be used to uphold systems of power which harm. But what does a successful, empowering recoding look like?

A successful recoding occurred in the summer of 2020, amidst the uprisings and responses to the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Campaign Zero, a criminal justice reform organization, put out a list of demands titled “#8Can’tWait,” arguing that the implementation of eight specific policies could reduce police violence by 72%. (Figure 14) A social media graphic depicted icons and descriptions for each policy—bright red boxes on a solid black background.

Only three days later, a group of abolitionist organizers released “#8ToAbolition.” 72 (Figure 15) Their graphic hacked the aesthetic presentation of #8Can’tWait to redirect social media attention towards more radical, abolitionist aims. The images are strikingly similar: white, vector-style icons depicting money, schools, and clipboards. Visual similarity was the point. #8ToAbolition aimed to push those already interested in criminal justice reform towards abolition through visual mimicry. The text shifted the conversation back to root causes, rather than reformist policy.

Similar icons represent contrasting policies. In both, a clipboard icon stands for the organization of information. The reformist organization’s clipboard demanded that “ All [use of] Force Be Reported.” The abolitionists used the same iconology for the demand “Repeal Laws Criminalizing Survival.” In the second instance, the icon has been hacked to direct our attention away from a temporary stopgap policy and towards the laws which put

68 Jackson, “Rethinking Repair,” 222.
69 Jackson, 223.
71 Jackson, “Rethinking Repair,” 229.
72 See #8toabolition.com for more. The group’s contributors were Mon Mohapatra, Leila Raven, Nhennaya Amuchie, Reina Sultan, K Agbebiyi, Sarah T. Hamid, Micah Herskind, Derecka Purnell, Eli Dru, and Rachel Kuo.
Images grow, change, and die over time. It was high spring and I met a friend at the brownstone gates to Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York. In the driveway were mourners, fresh from a funeral, kicking their shined shoes at the grass and making small jokes about their beloved. Alexia, my friend, works at Green-Wood as a guide and researcher. As we walked, we noted symbols and ornamentation on gravestones which I had no visual interpretation for. An urn covered halfway by a cloth. A stone lamb. A ghostly, white marble portrait of a woman staring down into the dirt. The graves varied in age, dating back to a time when Brooklyn looked more like this cemetery—a hilly countryside punctuated with old, glacial-deposited boulders. She told me how trends in the construction and material of graves ebbed and flowed. For a while, folks were into zinc monuments—marketed as “white bronze” for the way they mimicked a slate, stone color at the price point of cheap metal. Obelisks peeked over the rise of a hill here. Over there, crops of humble, shin-high stones leaned against their neighbors.

Alexia described how iconographies—the lamb signifying a lost child, for instance—are no longer used in contemporary commemorations of the dead. Others are still clear to us—at a grave for someone’s long-gone dog, Rex, people still lay sticks at the feet of this eternal good boy. If we don’t maintain cultural connections for how these graves communicate, much of the meaning is lost. We become unmoored from the significance the way family stories become muddled over generations. People like Alexia are maintainers. At Green-Wood, images from our past and present coexist.
survivors of domestic violence into the criminal justice system in the first place.

The illustrator Colleen Tighe writes that cycles of aesthetic repair often co-opt reformist or explicitly capitalist images to create something new. She cites both the #8toAbolition example and tools like Canva as sites of repair. Canva is a website for making social media graphics, slideshows, and design collateral. Its templated, DIY nature has attracted influencers and small brands, but also political organizers and educators.

The tool has its own pitfalls. Namely, the templates reinforce a glossy, hip, overly-designed aesthetic which can detract from the intended messaging. Templates also mean that template makers, an “expert” class of creators, determine how and why things work the way they do. But, as Tighe notes in “Deconstructing The Instagram Aesthetic,” “Canva is now an essential tool for organizers with no budget to create readable, easy to produce fliers, banners and graphics, without having to rely on the barrier of professional design and the expertise to run [Adobe] Creative Cloud.” It also allows organizers to co-opt the design sensibility of social media platforms to disseminate their ideas. Tighe calls this “a mask that lets people force an app made for selling us unattainable lifestyles to instead communicate radical ideas.”

An app like Canva both reinforces established aesthetics and offers a chance to hack new meanings from those aesthetics. On Canva, co-design means “design expertise is no longer just with the expert, it is distributed throughout whole communities.” We are watching real life examples of co-design blossoming. On a large, distributed scale, re-coded aesthetics can reclaim an image from a capitalist sensibility. “We lack the resources of the truly powerful, so we must attack with a tiny thousand cuts,” writes Tighe. “When I see young people and organizers galvanized by this movement creating a message of their own design, I see a tiny blade, in sync with many others.”

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74 Tighe.
75 Tighe.
76 Tighe.
What Now?—Limits, Practicalities, and Pitfalls

As the constructivist artist El Lissitzky states in the quote which opens this paper, we need to expand the concept of image-maker from a professionalized role to something that each citizen engages in, through active co-design and everyday drawing. Tighe’s examples from Canva, Facebook’s content moderators, and the #8toAbolition hack prove that successful repair of our visual world is not a top-down, art directed process. Expanding the boxes of our imagination requires an intentional worldbuilding led by those who have been harmed by the dominant “world picturebook.” Political image-making as a worldbuilding practice can only succeed when those engaged in it have clear visions of their goals, priorities, and values. If the worldbuilding practices succeed, then every image, agitprop or not, helps maintain the road forward. Meanwhile, professional illustrators can use a practice of political looking to reflect on their own practices and habits. What images do you rely on that could use repair? How can your work better support your audience?

Posters, zines, comics, and animation can be acts of care, as well as artifacts of our moment.

The uneasy truces discussed at the beginning of this paper aren’t going anywhere anytime soon, and systems of oppression and harm will continue to impact the most vulnerable in our communities. Image-making may not be the most direct weapon against harm, but it is essential in expanding our ideas of what is possible. Images—posters, zines, comics, animation—can be acts of care, as well as artifacts of our moment.

Pitfalls are inevitable in this work. But they don’t have to be endings. As we’ve seen from the work of Freire, Tsing, Wark, and others, pitfalls can signal the beginnings of something latent, but new. If we accept precarity in our lives and images, if we hope for repair instead of limitless progress, what emerges? “Without progress, what is struggle?” Tsing asks.77

If we succeed in de-centering the “expert” image-maker, then political looking can come from anywhere and might result in more glimmers, as well as chaotic patches of difference. In the meantime, a practice of “political looking” can include critical self-awareness of the images around us. What are their histories? What are their codes? Ephemeral glimpses of images not yet seen or those repairing themselves before our eyes. In looking, we can use precarity to make something new.

The limits of the practices discussed in this paper are obvious: deadlines, economic needs, bad clients, and our own artistic struggles mean that worldbuilding can’t and won’t be a consistent part of our image-making. But, to return to Le Guin, there is no utopic end. All we have is means. In acknowledging our limits, we acknowledge that using the best means we can each day moves us all forward. Practices of worldbuilding, political looking, and critical reflection will help us notice the ephemeral glimmer which marks a point where slow, ever-moving change can break into revolutionary upheaval.

Setting out hopes and aspirations for a new world is essential. But those hopes grow from the world at hand. “Indeterminacy is not the end of history but rather that node in which any beginnings lie in wait.”78


78 Tsing, 254.
LE VOTE NE CHANGE RIEN
LA LUTTE CONTINUE
The Precarity of Images

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