

# THE ECONOMIC ASPECT IN CONTEMPORARY WRITING AND THE MATTER OF CLASS IN LITERATURE:

## Reading selected conceptual works

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There are only impressions as to when and how conceptualism emerged in the Philippines, which occurred much earlier in the field of visual arts than in literature. These are just impressions because it appears that the dominant aesthetics in the field of literature— formalism and social realism—encumber the growth of conceptualist writing in the country. This essay is more rudimentary, and does not claim to comprehensively map conceptual writing's place and directions in Philippine literature. At the same time, this essay aims to contribute to the studies about conceptual writing in the Philippines which we posit are scarce at the present, given its negligible participation and inclusion, if any, in the traditions of writing in the archipelago.

Citing Epifanio San Juan's "Postkonseptwal na tula, Konseptwalistang Diskurso" (2013), one of our encounters with the rare instantiations of Filipino writing about conceptual writing, can also be an occasion for laying open a concise definition of conceptualism: in this kind of writing, or cultural production in general, "ang konteksto/sitwasyon ang siyang dumidikta. Ito'y nakadiin sa proseso, at nakasalig sa konsepto o kaisipang umuugit o gumagabay sa pagbuo—hindi sa produkto." In the same essay, San Juan also traces conceptualism's ties with the various avant-garde movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, "anti-expressive" movements such as Surrealism, Dadaism, Russian Constructivism and so on. In place of the author's "genius" is a variety of replacements: the unconscious, chance, and Internet algorithm, among others. Against the modernist genius and what it produces, conceptualism is a successor of these movements. Two shifts ensue from this: the first one is the shift to the concept or idea and the second one is the shift to the method or process. The methodical reframing or appropriating of existing cultural works in the second divests "originality" of its old importance.

In the hands of conceptualism, the objective is no longer to make original products but to make use of old materials and texts by putting them in new procedures, under new methods and frames—it applies a new concept onto these old materials and texts in order to make them new. Having conceptual works as its primary texts, this essay can also help in elucidating the contours of conceptualism.

## THE ECONOMIC IN CONCEPTUAL WRITING

It was 2013 when Cars Are Real published *Kill List* by American author Josef Kaplan. In this work, the author directly calls out the names of other writers who are within his network of identification and influence. This calling of attention reminds the authors of their respective classes which belong to and are stratified

as part of the bourgeoisie. These ascriptions were not direct in Kaplan's work for he only chose the terms "rich" and "comfortable." But as suggested by its title, *Kill List* sends the strongest mark that it wants to "kill" these authors and their social representations.

The book has more or less 60 pages, with each page comprised of four lines arranged in a form similar to that of poetry. All of the lines daringly name various writers, soliciting critical attention. To quote from *Kill List* itself:

Samantha Giles is comfortable.  
Madeline Gins is a rich poet.  
Judith Goldman is a rich poet.  
Kenneth Goldsmith is a rich poet.

Lesser Gonzalez Alvarez is comfortable.  
Johannes Goransson is comfortable.  
Nada Gordon is comfortable.  
Michael Gottlieb is a rich poet (Kaplan 2013, 22).

In this gesture, a mockery appears to be at work, and it centers on the economic aspect of writing. Kaplan's work suggests that in the capitalist arrangement of society, the current arrangement in which his work manifests, the only ones who can have a successful stint in writing are those who are relatively rich and comfortable; that the only ones who have access to literature are those who can afford the rising costs of tuition fees and quality books. This is then tied to trends in the state of education manifested across the globe. For instance, there is the decline of the humanities in higher education, whose most recent manifestation is the order from Japanese education minister Hakuban Shimomura "to abolish [social science and humanities] organizations or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society's needs" (Grove). Way earlier, Terry Eagleton spoke of the "death of universities as centres of critique" ("The Death of Universities"). In the Philippines, similar manifestations are not lacking. To name two, there is first, the CHED Memo No. 20 series of 2013 which seeks to abolish the teaching of Filipino subjects in college; and second, the bigger phenomenon of the K to 12 Program which adds two years to basic education but also subtly discourages the pursuit of specialized studies in college. The first is linked with the second, for one of the justifications for removing Filipino subjects in the collegiate curriculum is the inclusion of these subjects in the curriculum for junior and senior high students.

Following this, it becomes possible to posit that in the context from which Kaplan is writing, literature—from its mere access to its critical study—is treated as an unproductive kind of excess. While on the one hand, there is a façade of unending literary production, the abovementioned conditions surrounding such production are hardly explicated: (1) literary production is mostly emanating from the rich and the comfortable, (2) the costs of education in general and literature in particular have made both of them inaccessible, and (3) the continued studying, let alone the spawning of critical discourse about literature, arguably devalued by institutions like the academy, deemed less useful and profitable in contemporary society.

From these elaborations, we can surmise the shape of literature that is “excessive” yet at the same time “unproductive,” which we claim Kaplan is presenting and mocking in *Kill List*. Aside from being made by the “rich” and the “comfortable,” this literature hardly exhibits any cognizance of social relations—relations that are *not just* cultural—that immensely contribute to their conditions of possibility. Arguably, if indirectly, enabling the artistic and cultural production of the “rich” and the “comfortable” are the travails of other classes in society, particularly the working class. The toil of the working class allows the “rich” and the “comfortable” to “concentrate” on their artistic productions. It is in this manner that social relations based on class largely make up the conditions of possibility for the literary enterprises of the “rich” and the “comfortable.”

In *Kill List*, Kaplan does not spare himself. He includes his name in the list of writers who are either “rich” or “comfortable,” whom he wants to “kill.” This inclusion can be taken as a gesture of self-critique:

Lanny Jordan Jackson is comfortable.  
Jewel is a rich poet.  
Josef Kaplan is comfortable.  
Justin Katko is a rich poet (Kaplan 2013, 29).

The inclusion of his own name in “Kill List” shows Kaplan’s reflexive awareness of his position in the arrangement he seems to be attacking. The self-reflexivity of Kaplan’s critique makes it exemplary of institutional critique, as elaborated on by more contemporary commentators on artistic practice. For instance, Pil and Galia Kollektiv asserted that “this critique necessarily takes place within institutions, because there is no other place it could happen” (Kollektiv and Kollektiv 2015). This view can be appreciated more once juxtaposed with the tendency to frown upon and describe the act of associating one’s self with or joining institutions as an act of complicity. However, institutional critique betokens that being-inside institutions

can also pave the way for a critique of it, and a critique that is necessarily different from one that is made from outside the institutions.

We cannot help but recall Angelo Suarez's work called "Leisure" (2015) published by Ateneo's *Kritika Kultura*. Suarez's work does not directly support Kaplan's work, but connections are evident when it comes to the economic aspects of writing. Whereas Kaplan lists names of fellow writers in his work, Suarez lists the occupations of Filipino writers alongside the writing poetry. In describing his work, Suarez writes that "*Leisure* is a collage of parts of Filipino writers' bionotes which came from various books" (85). There was no conscious framework from where these "various books" came from or what the constraints were in deciding on his source texts, so it is of necessary assumption that he might have read or owned these books. The lacking framework is very important in determining the object of his critique, and we think that this is a matter of compositional fissure. However, and as its title hints, it is important to acknowledge that he is writing about writing-as-leisure at the foreground. Here are some parts of the work:

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Similar to the spirit engulfing Kaplan's work, Suarez's *Leisure* shows that the economic aspect of writing in relation to the larger social context can never be isolated from the works of an author. In fact, the former even largely influences the latter: an author's position and positioning in the realm of the social—economic relations at the main—greatly influence the kind of works the author produces. We read *Leisure* as a way of saying that creative writing in general and writing poetry in particular is just one kind of "leisure" different from our main occupations or professions which provide us livelihood; these in turn enable us to keep on writing—a supposedly "noble" enterprise but in fact a mostly self-serving one.

We can make sense of the "leisurely" trait of creative writing in at least two ways: (1) writing-as-leisure is an enterprise that serves as refuge for its mostly middle-class

practitioners—in Suarez’s work, we can see from the bionotes that most of the writers are either university professors, scholars, or graduate students—as they also experience varying degrees of fatigue and exploitation in the workplace; (2) writing-as-leisure-as-self-serving is an enterprise that hardly brings into light and confronts the material situations where writing takes place. Most of the time, it is done in order to pad one’s individual career or conform with the various demands or set a trajectory of achievements in one’s “primary” occupation: tenureship for university teachers, full-time status for researchers, or a degree for graduate students. Most of the time, resignation reigns. I am a middle-class worker who is also exploited so I will write for leisure; I am a middle-class worker who wants to keep myself entrenched in this class—sometimes I fantasize of rising even a notch—so I will write and write and write. In other words: there is hardly a perspective to disturb the existing social order where all writing transpires. Definitely, there are exceptions to this but we do not doubt that more is to be done in order to marshal literary productions toward questioning the very site of their origination.

#### **CLASS AS AN ASPECT IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE**

Kaplan appears to be mocking literatures that circulate only among the “rich” and the “comfortable”; on his part, Suarez appears to be attacking the kind of writing that is bourgeois exercise. Essentially, the two are confronting socio-cultural aspects of politics and economy, but do they also confront the political economy of the social structure they dwell in?

Conversely, we call to task Kaplan for his tendency to be economic-determinist, as if politics and culture are not important factors in shaping and directing the social position and positioning of writers in our political world. In *Class in Culture*, (2007) Teresa Ebert and Mas’ud Zavarzadeh assert that one’s class origins do not directly reflect one’s class bias, as this bias can be proactive instead of simply fixed and flaccid (ix). This aspect was not interrogated by Kaplan. He ended with class origins or current class positions—rich or comfortable—and did not even suggest that there can be a bias against one’s class origin or position, a bias that can make one betray one’s own class; even more farfetched but not unlikely, a bias against a social setup where classes exist.

Reading Kaplan’s work, Janine, one of this essay’s authors, was reminded of a question that arose from a drunken conversation with a friend. He asked: Do the National Democrats not merely want to turn the exploited class—which supposedly has great potential to be “proletarianized”—into the bourgeois class? Why do the

campaigns of the Philippine Left call for free education and health services and raising the minimum wage of workers? Do not these calls, by asking for all sorts of economic provisions and power, only seek to transport the exploited class from the lower to the upper rung of the society?

The drunkenness of the question can be delusive, and only a sober and solid analysis can point out its incorrectness. To note briefly, the National Democratic Revolution is guided by the Communist Party of the Philippines and posits that the status of Philippine society as semi-colonial and semi-feudal can be changed by a protracted people's war in the countryside coupled with parliamentary struggle in the urban areas. Going back, the drunken question stated above is incorrect because the revolution being waged by the National Democratic Movement is not just an economic revolution. It is a comprehensive revolution that seeks to systematically dismantle existing political and cultural structures in the country. Similar to Kaplan's work, the question has a propensity to view economy as deterministic to the extent that it devalues, if not negates, the active role of politics and culture in the clash of social forces and classes, given that he was clearly coming from the problem of economism. As classical Marxists point out in the structure of society, the economic base presupposes political and cultural structures but that does not mean that the political and cultural spheres are completely at the thrall of the economic base. In other words, the relation among them is dialectical and does not move in a singular direction. Kaplan's work overlooks this correlation and rigidly trails the singular dictating power of economy. The designations he employed in his work—comfortable and rich—are taken merely as economic categories and this makes the presence of the political and the cultural aspects in his work doubtful. At most, these aspects are lazily, dismissively implied as direct offshoots of the economic, as if approximating the following: Kenneth Goldsmith is a rich poet; his political stance is reactionary or backward; Samantha Giles is comfortable; her cultural production is socially aware but easy to co-opt. Much worse, the political and cultural aspects are entirely ignored.

A particular determinism is also at work in Suarez's *Leisure*. For us, this is shown in the work's narrow conflation of "Filipino poets" and *their* kinds of practices. Our interpretation is that *Leisure* takes solely the works of bourgeois writers as its material. This reading is cued by Suarez's explanation of the work itself where the concept behind bionotes names them as the texts "in which (poets) disclose what jobs they hold for the accumulation of capital other than the writing of poetry" (85). With his framing, Suarez deems the non-poetic endeavors of poets he chose as an instance of "accumulation of capital." Given this framing, it can be inferred that the writers featured in *Leisure* are those writers who kowtow to and seek approval from the existing literary institutions, which are in themselves propped up by the larger social configuration. Hence, what we find problematic in Suarez's *Leisure*

is twofold: (1) with its limited constitution of “Filipino poets,” it also presents a limited view of their practices, i.e. one that is subservient to the “accumulation of capital” and (2) its presentation of the poets’ bid to gain capital makes it as if all of these poets uncritically subscribe to this logic; it mutes the possibilities for critical engagement actually enacted by some poets while they tarry within literary institutions entailing the very accumulation of capital Suarez names.

Following these, the applicability of Suarez’s attack should be narrowed down. First, it is not applicable to other writers who write in the countryside: those who advance a comprehensive revolution that will not only change cultural dimensions of our social life but will also destroy the current economic and political setup. Second, its applicability to so-called progressive writers in the cities—whose involvement and engulfment in the workings of Capital are more significant than those in the countryside—is nuanced by the different dynamics at work brought about by the potential of combating the very structures that engulf them. Writers from the cities are not a homogenous, undifferentiated mass; there are also differences among them in terms of political inclinations and commitments. As such, it is improper to apply Suarez’s critique to all writers from the urban areas. While we accept that most of the writers in the cities are from the middle class, we also want to expose that not all members of the middle class are for the bourgeoisie, or for the existing social conditions. In addition, while it is also likely true that most writers in the cities are part of or work with literary institutions, it does not mean that all of them merely reproduce the workings of these institutions and do not engage them productively from within, or even outside—on the streets waxed as spaces of democracy.

Our second critique of Kaplan’s work has to do with its depthless remonstrance against class. We think that the work exhibits boldness but the object of such boldness is nebulous, in effect almost nullifying that boldness. To use Ebert and Zavarzadeh again, “Owning a home or a car or fines clothes does not by itself put a person in one or another class. What does, is owning the labor power of others in exchange for wages” (x). While the definition of “class” that Kaplan is frowning upon in his work appears to be flimsy and vague, Suarez’s work has a more apparent object of critique: the issue of labor-aside-from-writing and how writers nod to various forms of exploitation in order to carve a ‘leisurely’ space for their writing of poetry. Although this object of critique is not fully clear and solidified, it cannot be denied that Suarez’s work has greater perception of the concrete relations of production and the material logic of social reality which subsumes both the writers’ labor and the products themselves being exploited for profit.

Moreover, we can use Suarez’s awareness exhibited in his work, in order to criticize Kaplan’s analyses. We say this about Kaplan because we posit that



self-reflexivity and recognizing or admitting complicity does not suffice. To amplify our attack, we again turn to Ebert and Zavarzadeh, for they have some quite relevant and poignant points about this:

Most writers who still use the concept of class prefer to talk about it in subtle and shaded languages of overdetermination, lifestyle, taste, prestige, and preferences, or in the stratification terms of income, occupation, and even status. These are all significant aspects of social life, but they are *effects* of class and not class. (x)

In other words, class is not only a cultural category; it is primarily an economic category rooted in actual and material relations in society.

### THE REVOLUTIONARY POSSIBILITIES OF CONCEPTUALISM

We understand that conceptualism is very aware of the social dimensions of form, of how form becomes its principal site of engaging its own social configuration. This said awareness illuminates the manner by which conceptualism is politically engaged. We admire the voices that use art as venues of criticism, but this awareness is clearly lacking when critique ends merely as critique.

This is something we want to posit with Kaplan and Suarez's critical engagement with literary production: if all of a sudden the governments of the world together with the "comfortable" and "rich" give the workers higher wages, offered them better healthcare, and provided more importance to education and literacy so we can all afford to write poems, does that mean our socio-cultural and political dilemmas are all solved in a whiff? Or do we recognize the need for a total and complete change in our current social system, including the eventual crumbling of the state and the eradication of classes to be able to answer the old problems of our times? We pronounce a disagreement with the first question as these "developments" work with a logic that maintains the same feudal and exploitative relations in the façade of care and aid. As in line with the second question, we acknowledge that art could be an instrument in achieving an impossible future led by new leaders, if not a reflection of the on-going revolution.

For us, conceptualism emerges from revolution as the revolution dialectically informs conceptualism; emphasizing the need to employ insurgencies in form and content. Because issues of labor and class have already been mentioned above, what we are looking for in Suarez's work (and in conceptual writing in general) has something to do with this: We are itching to find out his/its class

bias and positioning. This is in the light of the undeniable surge in the influence of conceptualism among writers from many parts of the world. For instance—and we have already mentioned this above in relation to Suarez’s *Leisure*—there is a glaring and noticeable silence when it comes to pinpointing the real enemies and structures that the poet has to confront in the Philippine context. This is because we think that being a poet is not among the primary problems in society and literature. It is capitalism.

While Suarez’s daring assertions and performance are vital, we posit that it is still gravely lacking. As stated in the preface of his work, *Leisure* is an unfinished work and will not be finished until publishing desists in the country. Coming from this premise, it would be pretty to push the exhaustiveness of *Leisure* by including works and occupations that are not subjected to the logic of Capital, if not adamantly battling it. These are the works that are usually not in the radar of the mainstream publishing houses in the country because they will earn nothing from these books but state surveillance and unsolicited death threats; these are the works of writers who are not thinking about individual careers but those who are sweating for a larger cause. A good example can be seen in the following profiles taken from the book *STR: Mga Tula ng Digmang Bayan sa Pilipinas*:

First joined the New People’s Army in Isabela in 1971; now a ranking NPA officer in Northern Luzon. Author of the historical essay “The Long March of the New People’s Army in Cagayan Valley, 1976-78.” His novel on the armed movement in Cagayan is presently being serialized in “Baringkuas,” a regional mass newspaper.

He worked as a Red fighter and propagandist in the Panay countryside. He was killed by the enemy in June 1986.

A former university professor and priest. He worked as a Red fighter in the Cordillera. He is the author of “Clearing,” a collection of his poetry in English. (MAINSTREAM 230)

Upon including these profiles, would Suarez’s *Leisure* not drastically change by showing other forms of work that do not abide by and even contradict the workings of Capital? Or will the context where Suarez’ *Leisure* operates be immensely enriched?

The revolution that conceptualism ushered in is a revolution that mainly applies in the field of artistic and cultural production. But following what we have belabored above, it does not mean that conceptualism is not making a political stake; it does not mean that conceptualism cannot be mobilized in the face of current socio-economic conditions. Conceptualism is not a mere cultural phenomenon; its emergence did not occur just in the cultural realm, i.e. as prodded

by the wish to contest the Modernist notion of genius. It emerged from a social totality with its economic, political, and cultural conditions. While the emergence of conceptualism was defined by the limits of this social totality, it does not mean that it can no longer be responsible for its own fashioning which can then allow it to question and go against the social conditions of its birthing.

As a phenomenon, just like other social phenomena and entities, conceptualism has the capacity for self-fashioning or self-determination even as this very process is constrained by the social totality in which it brawls and breathes. Eagleton's remarks about this matter will be helpful: "To call a piece of art" (or any social entity) "self-determining is not to claim, absurdly, that it is free of determination, but that it makes use of these determinations to fashion its own logic and give birth to itself" (*The Event of Literature* 139). This self-birthing lends a relative kind of autonomy to every entity or phenomenon even as they remain within their larger social contexts. Similarly, we posit that this has allowed conceptualism to make all kinds of fire—a flare, a flame, a conflagration—within the cultural traditions from which it sprang and thereby killing them little by little. But the revolutionary possibilities opened up by conceptualism can also apply in the larger social totality. It can also say something, do something, about this larger social context: endorse it, laugh at it, seek to expand it, seek to transform it.

It would indeed be leisurely, if not reaffirming, to be part of—and not just witness—the pivotal change on what the term "leisure" signifies: by including in the list those valiant writers who systematically turn their backs at what the STR calls the "traditional patron of the development of an intellectual in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society" (MAINSTREAM 11). In making open the existence of these writers, the conceptual works can imply a new "kill list": not just the mostly bourgeois composition of artists but the very social system which sustains that limitation.

Then we arrive at two novel senses that can expand the revolutionary possibilities we can expect conceptualism to fulfill: first, the "kill list" may not be a "list" at all, or it may be a list but with only one entry under it repeated again and again: the current social totality that is capitalism; and second, "leisure" is no longer enclosed in the act of writing itself; leisure will pertain to the participation in a sustained struggle against capitalist society and the day-by-day effort aimed toward a future society that can afford justness, peace and yes, leisure for all.

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