



**Nina Power** is a philosopher and activist whose writings span European philosophy, politics, feminism, arts and culture. She is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy in the Department of Humanities at The University of Roehampton. Power is the author of *One-Dimensional Woman* (2009) and, with Alberto Toscano, co-editor and translator of Alain Badiou's *On Beckett* (2003). This essay “!/?”, on the politics of punctuation, is part of a larger research project concerning contemporary words, symbols and images. Power lives and works in London.

**Part 1: !**

[T]he entire thrust of the LTI [*The Langue of the Third Reich*] was towards visualisation, and if this process of visualizing could be achieved with recourse to Germanic traditions, by means of a runic sign, then so much the better. And as a jagged character the rune of life was related to the SS symbol, and as an ideological symbol also related to the spokes of the wheel of the sun, the swastika ... Renan's position: the question mark - the most important of all punctuation marks. A position in direct opposition to National Socialist intransigence and self-confidence ... From time to time it is possible to detect, both amongst individuals and groups, a characteristic preference for one particular punctuation mark. Academics love the semicolon; their hankering after logic demands a division which is more emphatic than a comma, but not quite as absolute a demarcation as a full stop. Renan the sceptic declares that it is impossible to overuse the question mark.

- Victor Klemperer, 'Punctuation' from *The Language of the Third Reich*.<sup>1</sup>

In the era of emojis, we have forgotten about the politics of punctuation. Which mark or sign holds sway over us in the age of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube comments, emails, and text messages? If we take the tweets of Donald Trump as some kind of symptomatic indicator, we can see quite well that it is the exclamation mark - ! - that dominates. A quick look at his tweets from the last 48 hour period shows that almost all of them end with a single declarative sentence or word followed by a '!': 'Big trade imbalance!', 'No more!', 'They've gone CRAZY!', 'Happy National Anthem Day!', 'REST IN PEACE BILLY GRAHAM!', 'IF YOU DON'T HAVE STEEL, YOU DON'T HAVE A COUNTRY!', (we shall leave the matter of all caps for another time), '\$800 Billion Trade Deficit-have no choice!', 'Jobless claims at a 49 year low!' and so on ... you get the picture. Trump's exclamation mark is the equivalent of a boss slamming his fist down on the table, an abusive partner shouting at a tentative query, an exasperated shock jock arguing with an imaginary opponent. It is the exclamation mark as the final word, which would not

1. Klemperer, Victor. *Language of the Third Reich: LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii*. Translated by Martin Brady. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

be so frightening if Trump's final word was not also backed up by nuclear annihilation, the US army, the police, court and prison system, vast swathes of the US media and electorate, and multiple people around him too afraid to say 'no.' This is the exclamation mark as apocalypse, not the '!' of surprise, amusement, girlish shyness, humour, or ironic puncture. This is the exclamation of doom.

The *Sturm und Drang* needed an unusually large number of exclamation marks, suggests Klemperer, and, though you might suspect the LTI (*Lingua Tertii Imperii* - the language of the Third Reich as Klemperer calls it) would adore the exclamation mark, "given its fundamentally rhetorical nature and constant appeal to the emotions," in actual fact "they are not at all conspicuous" in Nazi writings.<sup>2</sup> Why did the Nazis not need the exclamation mark? Klemperer states, "[i]t is as if [the LTI] turns everything into a command or proclamation as a matter of course and therefore has no need of a special punctuation mark to highlight the fact - where after all are the sober utterances against which the proclamation would need to stand out?"<sup>3</sup>

This point alone should herald a terrible warning. "Sober utterances" - from rational debate, to well-researched news, to public and open discussion - when these go, the exclamation marks will go too, because there will be no opposition left to be falsely outraged against. There will be no critical press, no free thought, no social antagonism, because anyone who stands against the dominant discourse will disappear, and perhaps social death will suffice, rather than murder, if only because it is easier to do. When Trump and others attack the media, it is so that one day their tweets will no longer need the exclamation of opposition. It is so that all statements from above will be a command or proclamation in a frictionless, opposition-less universe.

But we are also tempted by the exclamation mark because it is also a sign, in some contexts, of another kind of disbelief. Not the Trump kind in which he cannot reconcile the fact that others disagree with him (or even that they exist), but the kind which simply says 'oh my goodness!' or 'that's great!' or 'I'm shocked/surprised/happy stunned!' But then we use them all the time and they grow tired and weak... and we use them defensively, when we say: 'I'm sorry this email is so late!', 'I have been so useless lately!', 'I'm so tired I can hardly see!' and so on, ad infinitum ... (and what of the ellipses? ... another time, another time).

If you look at the comments to YouTube videos (a sentence to which nothing good is ever likely to be added), you will find a particular use of the exclamation mark. Take, for example, the currently number one trending video: 'Jennifer Lawrence Explains Her Drunk Alter Ego "Gail"', where the actress talks to Ellen DeGeneres on the latter's popular programme 'The Ellen Show' about how when she's on holiday and drinks rum

she becomes a masculine, adrenalin-junkie, alter-ego 'Gail' who jumps into shark-infested waters to amuse her friends, eats live sea creatures, and challenges people to arm-wrestling competitions. Apart from the slight melancholy induced by wondering why Jennifer Lawrence has to split herself into different beings in order to have a break from work, how does the 'public' response to the video tell us anything about the various uses of the exclamation mark? While many of the comments suggest that Lawrence is the victim of MKUltra mind control, and a victim of child abuse, or that she is fake, some of the comments shed a small, pitiful, grey kind of light on the exclamation mark as a kind of pleading into the void - the mark that will never be registered, because the speaker is speaking primarily to reassure him or herself.

There is the pleading, compassionate use: "love how she is so open!" says Kailey Bashaw, to which Oliver 2000 responds, "Yeah I love her porn pictures" with no punctuation at all. Lauren Robelto writes: "Everybody commenting about alcoholism makes me so sad. She's worked very hard and just wants to take a break and have fun and everyone's criticizes her. Honestly if I were her I wouldn't be able to stop drinking because of all the hate! Lighten up people! JLaw is gonna keep thriving with or without your support!!" A similar kind of plea, the plea of the fan, a plea for understanding combined with a passive-aggressive double use of the exclamation mark to signify a kind of double-triumph: the commentator has both convinced themselves and history that leaving negative (or indeed positive) comments on YouTube will in no way affect the reception of whoever they are passionate about.

There is a footnote in Marx's *Capital*, vol. 1 which does something interesting with the relation between the exclamation mark and the question mark, and I want to insert it here as the perfect dialectical extract for moving from the exclamation mark to the question mark. Here Marx is quoting Wilhelm Roscher writing about J. B. Say, the liberal economist famous for arguing that production creates its own demand. All the comments in parentheses are Marx's own: "'Ricardo's school is in the habit of including capital as accumulated labour under the heading of labour. This is unskillful (!), because (!) indeed the owner of capital (!) has after all (!) done more than merely (!?) create (?) and preserve (??) the same (what same?): namely (!?) the abstention from the enjoyment of it, in return for which he demands, for instance (!!!) interest.' How very 'skilful' is this 'anatomico-physiological method' of political economy, which converts a mere 'demand' into a source of value!"<sup>4</sup>

Marx was famously brutal and scabrous in his take-downs, devoting hundreds of pages to figures that are now barely remembered, or remembered largely because Marx took them

2. Ibid. 67.

3. Ibid. 67.

4. Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume I: A Critique of Political Economy*. New York: International Publishers, 1977. 82.

down. But here our interest lies in the use of '!' and '?' and '!?' and '??' and '?!?' and '!!!'. What is Marx signalling here? Disbelief in idiocy, incomprehension, mockery, but also perhaps a curious hope. Hope? Hope in a better analysis, one worthier of the world, one that will explain rather than mystify...

## Part 2: ?

Are we today in need of more question marks? Klemperer describes, as above, the question mark as being "in direct opposition to National Socialist intransigence and self-confidence."<sup>5</sup> The question mark is itself a question, a kind of collapsed exclamation mark. A question mark can be an act of aggression or interruption: 'oh really?' But it can also function as a kind of pause, a break in the horrible flow, the babble, the endless lies. The question mark is the person who says 'hang on, what is being said here?', 'what is happening?', 'is this okay?' It is the question of the body that stands against the crowd, head bowed, frightened, but compelled by an inner question of their own - 'is this the right thing, what they are saying?' It is the feeling and the admission that one doesn't know, and the intuition that there might not be a simple answer to the situation. We are surrounded by people who want to give us their solutions, who tell us how things work, what we should think, how we should be, how we should behave. There are too few Socratic beings, and far too many self-promoters, charlatans, snake-oil salesmen, liars, confidence tricksters. We want to be nice, but we end up getting played. Anyone who claims to have 'the full picture' is someone who wants an image of the world to dominate you so you shut up or give them something they want. They are not your friends.

How to understand the question mark as a symbol, then, of trust? There must be room for exploration, of a mutual, tentative openness. A place where it is possible to say 'I don't know' and not feel ashamed or ignorant, or foolish, or unkind. The internet is so often a place where people are shunned and shamed for asking questions, as if ignorance wasn't a condition for knowledge, and as if we never wanted anyone to go beyond the things everybody already understands. Sometimes 'ignorance' is in fact the greatest kind of intelligence, and sometimes it is the most noble political strategy. Philosophy and psychoanalysis tells us that, in any case, we in fact know less than we think we do know. Knowledge and understanding are not transparent processes: we bury and forget, we lose the ability to ask questions of ourselves, and we when we think we understand ourselves this is when we dismiss others. We want to think that we are solely good, that we have the 'right position,' and that the others are wrong. But if we give up on our inner question mark, we become rigid, like the exclamation mark of condemnation. We forget that other people think differently and that not everyone must think the same thing. We forget about friendship, flexibility, and forgiveness.

If we do not give ourselves enough time to think about the politics of punctuation, we run the risk of being swept away on a wave of someone else's desire. We become passive pawns and stooges. We become victims of the malign desires of others to silence us, to put us down, to make us terrified and confused. Punctuation is not merely linguistic, but imagistic and political through and through. The ! and the ? are signs among other signs, but their relation and their power course through us when we are least aware of it. When we are face to face, we can use our expressions, our body as a whole, to dramatize these marks, with a raised eyebrow, a gesture, a shrug - a complex combination of the two marks can appear in and about us. But we are apart much of the time, and we must rely on markers that do not capture our collective understanding. We must be in a mode of play with the words and the punctuation we use, to keep a certain openness, a certain humour: not the cruelty of online life or the declarations of the powerful, but the delicate humour that includes the recognition that jokes are always aggressive, and that we live permanently on the edge of violence, but that we must be able to play if we are able to understand our drives, and, at the same time, the possibility of living together differently.

5. Klemperer, Victor. *Language of the Third Reich: LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii*. 74.





**Michiel Vandavelde** studied dance and choreography at P.A.R.T.S., Brussels. He is active as a choreographer, curator, writer and editor. He is a member of the artistic team of Kunsthal Extra City (together with Antonia Alampi and iLiana Fokianaki, from 2017 till 2019, Antwerp, BE) and Bâtard (a festival for emerging artists and thinkers, Brussels, BE). He is involved as an editor in the Disagree. magazine, and he has written articles for Etcetera, De Witte Raaf, Rekto:Verso, Mister Motley, among others. From 2017 to 2021 Michiel Vandavelde is artist in residence at Kaaaitheater (Brussels, BE). In his work he investigates the elements that constitute or obstruct the contemporary public sphere. He explores which other social, economic and cultural alternatives we can imagine in order to question, challenge and transform dominant logics and ways of organizing. He has been developing a variety of projects both in public space and in (performing) arts institutions.





... SPECULATING ON  
PUNCTUATION MARKS

MV, 2018



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EDITORIAL NOTE

If you were to propose a word for the future, what would it be? What language would it be in? How would this word sound when you say it out loud? What would this sound evoke in peoples minds? What would it perform?

Words can conjure up worlds. With language we can name, describe and give birth. It is said that we are within a so-called crisis of imagination; that we can't imagine alternatives for the current dominant systems that are failing. What does that say about language and the way we use it, and what potential is there in language to change this crisis? If we want to re-imagine our ways of being in and with the world, could we then start to describe it differently?

*Words for the Future* is a many-voiced series of ten words that point to the possible imaginations of various futures. Ten people from diverse fields of knowledge - ecology, sociology, experimental architecture, education, linguistics, philosophy, i.e. - are asked to propose a word for the future.

Each of them writes a text that unfolds the desired or foreseen way of thinking or doing, this word defines for them. At the same time an artist, in whose work this particular word seems already latently present, is invited to respond to it. By bringing both the essay and the artistic responds together in one publication, each issue becomes a dialogue around one word.

The texts and images that arose seem not only as glimpses of what possibly lies ahead, even more perhaps, these words and visions are engagements with the present. With this vocabulary of re-imagined words we might be able to begin to speak about the yet unnamed imaginaries that we notice around us, and have for the future.

Enjoy the journey through the worlds of these words,

Nienke Scholts  
*October, 2017*

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Natalia Chaves López - *historian, sociologist, environmentalist*  
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For more information about this series contact Nienke Scholts:  
nienke@veem.house

Veem House for Performance is a production structure and venue in Amsterdam. It is filled with voices: old and new, young and established, from the arts and beyond, coming from Amsterdam and abroad. It is welcoming artists to work and present and welcoming spectators to meet and discuss. Veem House is a site for the exploration of what performance can and should be in movement, time, and discourse; the questioning of what we take as given; and the performing of new proposals for ways of looking that take us on journeys to unknown worlds. It is a place where art, politics, ideas and people meet.

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Contributors  
Rachel Armstrong, Silvia Bottiroli, Natalia Chaves López, Gurur Ertem, Daniel L. Everett, Jalada | Moses Kilolo, Ashish Kothari, Oia Maciejewska, Sarah Moeremans, The NarrativeCollective | Hilda Moucharrafieh, Ogutu Muraya, Nina Power, Rodrigo Sobarzo, Simone Truong, TILT | Andrea Božić & Julia Wilms, (To) Come and See team | Simone Truong, Eilit Marom, Anna Massoni, Elpida Orfanidou & Adina Secretan, Michiel Vandevelde, and Jozef Wouters.

Curator / Editor  
Nienke Scholts

Publisher / Designer  
The Future

The Future Publishing and Printing is an experiment-focused studio. Over the years, their activities have ranged from editorial design, curation, and book making, to creating and organizing exhibitions and residencies. They see their role being to make ideas public in the medium that seems to fit best with the idea.

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Advisor  
Anne Breure

Copy editor  
Noah Voelker