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Droste Effect

GALLERIAPIÙ

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Stressed, Blessed
and
Coffee Obsessed

Toasting: From Green to Brown Beans

**A non academic paper by Vincenzo Estremo
with images collected by Débora Delmar**

Once, dystopian films and novels were exercises in such acts of imagination – the disasters they depicted acting as narrative pretext for the emergence of different ways of living. Not so in Children of Men. The world that it projects seems more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it. In its world, as in ours, ultra-authoritarianism and Capital are by no means incompatible: internment camps and franchise coffee bars co-exist.¹

Mark Fisher

How to Read the Tables

The images presented in the accompanying Tables have been selected or taken by artist Débora Delmar. The images are interconnected without a predetermined order. The function of these Tables is not didactic, but hypertextual. They do not illustrate anything contained in the text, rather they add a further level of textuality which may help the reader to better understand Débora Delmar's artistic practice.

¹ Mark Fisher (2009), *Capitalist Realism*, Zero Books.

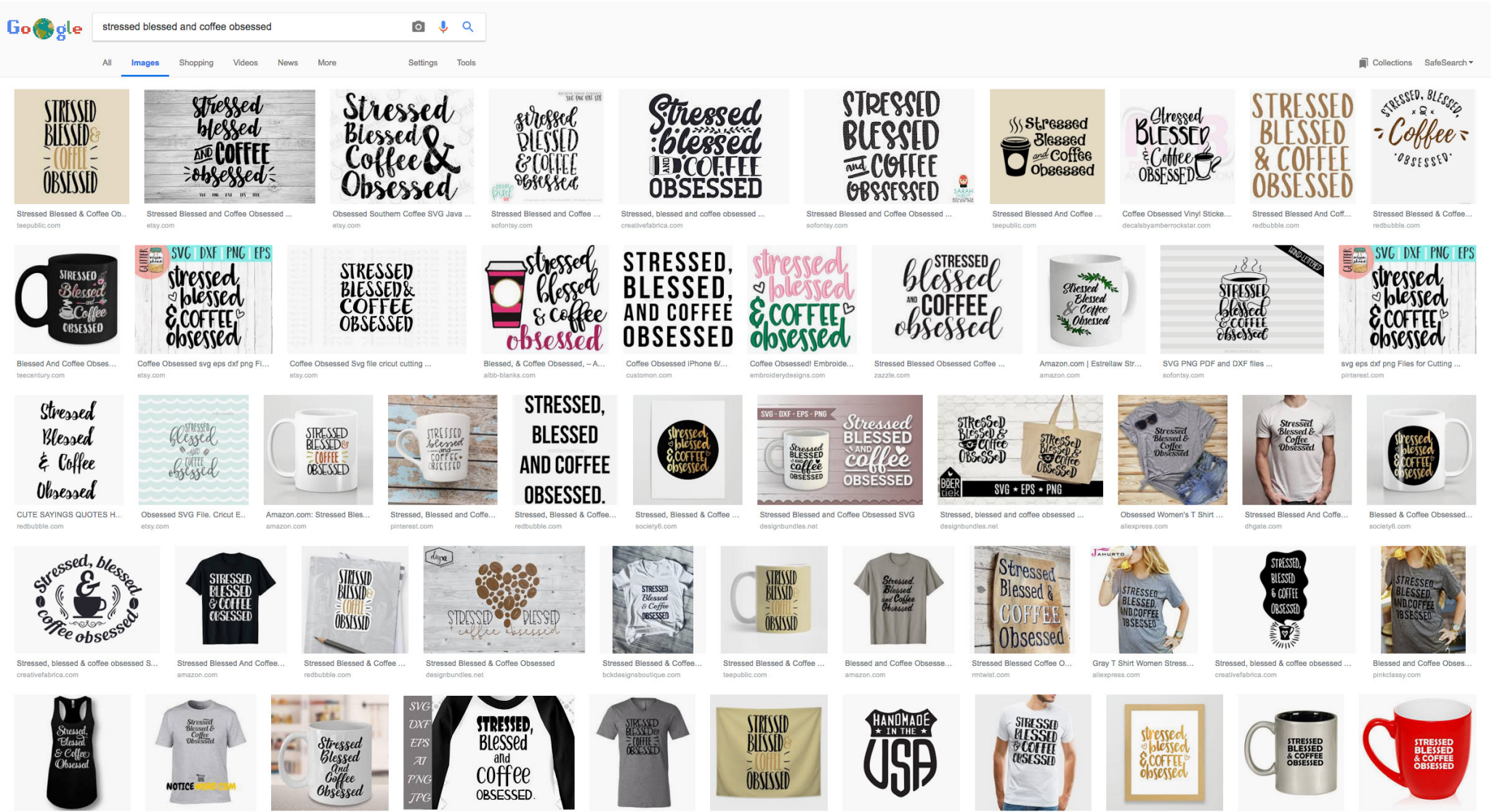


TABLE I

A Legend

The legend says that coffee was introduced in the Austrian Empire after the end of the Siege of Vienna in 1683. On that occasion, Turkish troops left behind several sacks of «strange» beans while leaving the city. It is said that the soldiers of the Austrian army were impressed as they smelled the fragrance of the beans thrown on a fire. In reality, this is nothing more than a legend, but it is interesting to note that in the story the fascination with coffee starts by chance, even though it is not by chance that coffee started ruling the world, like it did in the Austrian Empire after the end of the Siege of Vienna. In reality, the history of coffee penetration into the European culture was not that smooth, and coffee did not immediately encounter the taste of the Christian aristocracy when it started to circulate in Europe.

*I remember, we tried coffee
A drink (...) for Turks, but so very nasty
A beverage like vile poison and toxins
That doesn't let saliva pass through one's teeth
A Christian mouth let it never sully.²*

Other mouths, other than Christians', soon showed a love of that beverage, and drinking coffee immediately became a trans-classist habit. Without coffee, the world as we know it would not exist. Nowadays' growth in coffee consumption and the popularity of coffee shops represent only the latest evidence of humanity's long-standing fondness for coffee drinking, which seems to have begun around the 15th century in North Africa and the Middle East. The modern history of coffee is intertwined with the history of modernity and capitalism. The control of coffee production and distribution is one of the causes of the rising demand fuelled

² Poem by Jan Andrzej Morsztyn (around 1670), source unknown.

by Europe's colonial ambitions during the 18th and 19th century. A political mindset that still influences the global economy and international affairs.

In noticing the rapid growth of coffee-bar chains in the urban environment, it is often observed that monotony comes with ubiquity. Of course, no one would confuse a Caffè Nero outlet with a Starbucks, or an Au Bon Pain with an Illy Caffè. But equally, coffee-bar chains have some features in common, features that are deeply embedded in their chain structure. Each chain establishes prototypical solutions to retail problems across its markets: it seeks to identify single answers, and established patterns of response, to the daily difficulties of running a coffee shop. In the same way that the coffee, food and interiors of the coffee bars have a stylistic consistency, so too do the management solutions. Each chain has its own coffee academy where the staff are taught the key values of the company, how its product management systems work and how to perform its signature customer service. A coffee-bar chain is above all an assemblage of information: a digital phenomenon as much as a set of cups and tables, or a gathering of people. But the overwhelming feeling encountered in these coffee shops is their similarity to each other. In a study of airports, shopping malls and motorways, the French spatial theorist Marc Augé coined the term 'non-places' to describe this experience. Characteristic of non-places, Augé suggests, is their repetitive construction, to which individuals connect in a uniform manner and no organic social life is possible.¹⁸ It does not matter whether you visit a Starbucks in Tokyo, Santiago de Chile, Hawaii, or Vienna: everywhere you go they are the same. Some people no doubt find this comforting and the sales argue strongly that it is a successful formula. Many thousands of people – notably young women – now incorporate the coffee-house sociability in their lives, when there was none before. But as distinct locations become deracinated and homogenised, many more people experience this ubiquity as a sense of loss. Plangent eulogies about the lost paradise of the independent coffee-house abound, commemorating the idiosyncratic, organic, local construction of civic space in the great cafés of Vienna, London's vintage Formica working-man's cafes, or the classic French street café, with its zinc-topped bar and smell of stale Gauloises.¹⁹

Globalization of the Coffee Industry: Notes on its Impact

There is a caustic dialog in Jim Jarmush's film *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003) that tells us more than it seems about anxiety and contemporary society.

Iggy Pop: Hey, you know, you could call me Jim. I mean, you know, my friends call me Jim, or Jimmy, or Iggy, or Jiggy... Call me, call me Iggy!

Tom Waits: Ok, alright, whichever way you're comfortable, I'll go either way, Jim or Iggy...

Iggy: Iggy! You, you call me Iggy!

Tom: Look, I'm sorry I'm late Jim. Boy, whew, four car pile-up... whoof... I delivered a baby this mornin' about 9 o'clock. I was savin' lives... I was out there on the highway... I was, y'know – there's nothin' worse than roadside surgery... Y'know, you don't have your own tools... and it's just, it's murder... I performed a tracheotomy with a ballpoint pen... and I'm... whoof... I've been busy...

The impact of this beverage is not only related to its stimulating properties: like in the dialogue between Iggy Pop and Tom Waits, coffee has an impact on a global scale.

Even the current refugee crisis has an environmental element. In the years leading up to the war, Syria experienced its most extreme drought in recorded history. That drought, together with unsustainable agricultural practices and poor resource management, contributed to the internal displacement of 1.5 million Syrians and catalyzed political unrest ahead of the 2011 uprising. The link between environmental and agricultural pressures extends far beyond Syria.

Over-reliance on specific geographies for agriculture means that food production can exacerbate environmental problems, or even create new ones. This can pit global consumer interests against local citizen interests, as it has along the Mississippi River, where fertilizer runoff from one of the world's breadbaskets is contributing to concerns about water quality.

The connection goes both ways, with environmental conditions also shaping agricultural production – and, in turn, the prices of agricultural commodities, which represent about 10% of traded goods worldwide. For example, rising temperatures and altered precipitation patterns are already driving up the price of coffee. With the global land area suitable for growing coffee set to contract by up to half by 2050, price pressures will only intensify.³

A Philosophy: Politics for a Green Bean

Errico Malatesta began writing the series of dialogues that make up *At the Café: Conversations on Anarchism* in March 1897. The southern Italian anarchist had the idea to locate his dialogues in the coffee house, as he often frequented a *café* that was not usually the haunt of subversives such as himself. Those discussions are interesting because Malatesta's will was to engage in a political dialog with people with no political engagement: bourgeoisies. Once upon a time, when coffee houses were more or less like today, bourgeoisies were already there.

Nowadays, whenever we sit in a coffee house, we enact a political choice. The supposed cultural neutrality of this gesture could be related to media transparency, as stated by Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*;⁴ something that brought someone to say that Starbucks is more than a corporation, it is an (invisible) media corporation with a global impact.

³ Giulio Boccaletti, *The Geopolitics of Environmental Challenges*. <https://global.nature.org/content/the-geopolitics-of-environmental-challenges>

⁴ Immediacy, then, demands transparency – an interface that erases itself so that the user can stand «in an immediate relationship to the contents of the medium.» Cfr. Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin (1999), *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, MIT Press Ltd.

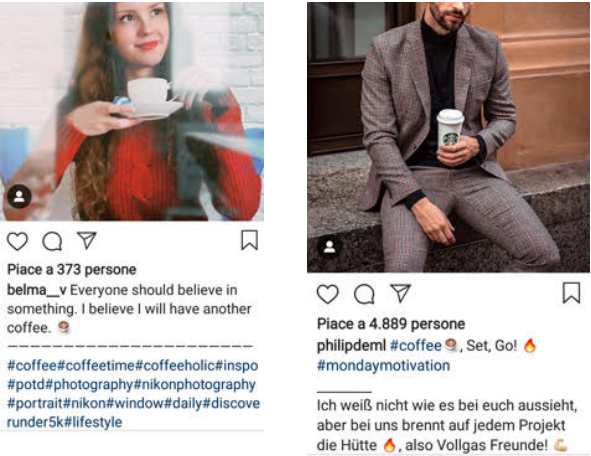


TABLE II

When sitting at a café, it's unusual to think about all the effort exerted to produce one cup of coffee. Let's consider the price that people are paid for their labor in coffee harvesting. When people harvest coffee they harvest enough to fill a bag weighing 60 kilograms (132 lbs.). One bag contains 198,000 cherries, or 396,000 coffee beans (since each cherry contains two beans). It takes 286 hours of labor to fill one bag with parchment (what results from the harvesting, washing, and drying of coffee in the village). This means that it takes approximately 2 hours and 10 minutes to harvest a pound of coffee (about 1,500 cherries, or 3,000 beans). One pound of coffee yields 40 6-ounce cups of coffee. So 130 minutes of labor produces 40 6-ounce cups of coffee. It thus takes about 3 minutes and 15 seconds of labor to harvest enough coffee to make one 6-ounce cup of coffee.

A one-pound bag of whole bean coffee from Starbucks under the name of Komodo Dragon Blend, a blend of Asia Pacific coffee beans with Papua New Guinea prominently mentioned on the label, costs \$12.95. That pound of Komodo Dragon Blend yields forty cups at \$0.32 a cup. If coffee producers were deriving all the money made from the coffee they produce, they would receive \$12.95 per pound of coffee, or \$12.95 per two hours and ten minutes of labor, or about \$6 an hour. But of course coffee producers do not receive all of the profits from the coffee they grow.⁵

The production of coffee is closely related to its price fluctuations. This instability has had both positive and negative effects on non-Western countries and created a social and economic paradox. As more and more coffee is produced, a surplus of value flows somewhere else, and doesn't stay in the countries that produce the beans. This process keeps the «producers» disadvantaged while making it simple for large coffee retailers to seek out the lowest price possible.⁶

⁵ Paige West (2014), «From Modern Production to Imagined Primitive: The Social World of Coffee from Papua New Guinea,» *Pacific Affairs* 87(1).

⁶ Jared Lewis, *The Effects of Globalization on Coffee Companies*. <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/effects-globalization-coffee-companies-37460.html>



TABLE III

Forgetting

Starbucks helps us to feel better and to forget what lies beyond a mug of hot black coffee.

Let's turn to the high point of our consumerism. Let me take a drink.

Starbucks coffee. I'm regularly drinking it, I must admit it. But are we aware, that when we buy a cappuccino from Starbucks, we also buy quite a lot of ideology? Which ideology?

You know, when you enter a Starbucks store, it's usually always displayed in some posters, their message, which is: «Yes, our cappuccino is more expensive than others,» but then comes the story:

«We give 1% of all our income to some Guatemalan children to keep them healthy, for the water supply for some Saharan farmer, or to save the forest, to enable organic growing for coffee, or whatever or whatever.»

Now, I admire the ingenuity of this solution. In the old days of pure, simple consumerism, you bought a product, and then you felt bad. «My God, I'm just a consumerist, while people are starving in Africa...»

So the idea is that you had to do something to counteract your pure, destructive consumerism. For example, I don't know, you contribute to charity, and so on.

What Starbucks enables you to do is to be a consumerist without any bad conscience, because the price for the countermeasure, for fighting consumerism, is already included into the price of a commodity. Like, you pay a little bit more, and you're not just a consumerist, but you do also your duty towards the environment, the poor, starving people in Africa, and so on and so on. It's, I think, the ultimate form of consumerism.⁷

⁷ Slavoj Žižek in Sophie Fiennes' documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012).

Débora Delmar (1986, Mexico City) lives and works in London, where she is completing the Postgraduate Programme at the Royal Academy of Arts. Through her artwork, Delmar investigates consumer culture, capitalist lifestyles, and aspirational aesthetics. She is particularly focused on the societal effects of globalization such as class issues and cultural hegemony. Delmar creates multi-sensory installations that are usually composed of elements such as fabricated and appropriated objects, reproductions of iPhone photographs, and elements such as scent, sound and performance, as well as online interventions.

Vincenzo Estremo is a writer, an art critic, and an independent curator. He holds a Ph.D. in Audiovisual Studies: Cinema, Music, and Communication at Udine University and Kunstuniversität Linz, while previously he studied History of Art at «Carlo Bo» University in Urbino. Estremo is currently a lecturer for NABA – Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan. He is editor-in-chief of *Droste Effect Magazine* and a regular contributor for *Objektive*, *Arte&Critica*, *Juliet* and *Camera Austria*. Estremo has curated exhibitions in Europe and collaborated with several museums and art institutions, such as IMMA Dublin, MAMBO Bologna, Chiado Lisbon, and Kunsthalle Vienna.



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