

The Historical Materialist Illusion Theater:
Remembering the Goddess Civilization

by

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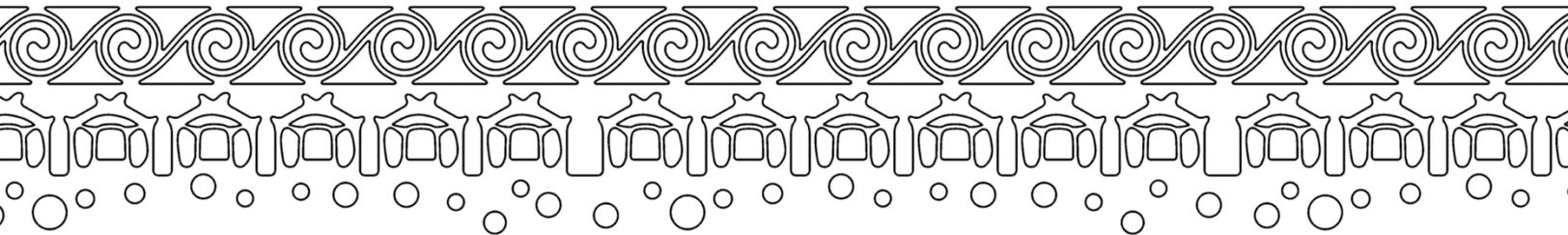
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The Historical Materialist Illusion Theater



The Historical Materialist Illusion Theater is an interactive installation focused on the work of Lithuanian-American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994), designed using CAD software and fabricated using CNC processes. The installation functions as an art piece but also a self-contained exhibition of Neolithic artifacts reproduced with modern technology. This installation provides an experience for viewers to engage with archaeology and art history, and to learn about cultures that lived thousands of years ago. Common western historical narratives about the origins of social inequality in prehistory follow Rousseau's concept that social inequality was a result of agriculture and the subsequent growth of urban life. Gimbutas rejected this hypothesis, instead arguing that the origins of patriarchy and warfare which persist in modern times postdated agriculture by thousands of years. Modern science and advances in technology have provided new means of understanding prehistoric times, particularly developments in the field of DNA analysis from ancient human remains. In a shock to archaeological consensus, new data from archaeogenetics has vindicated some key aspects of Marija Gimbutas' theories.

The installation is composed of two pieces of furniture: the theater (52" x 32" x 75"), and the controller table (27" x 23" x 29"). The form of the theater is an artistic composition inspired by the work of Gimbutas, but within, specific artifacts are represented with 3D-printed PLA, lasercut plywood, CNC-milled MDF, and displayed in a video projected inside the theater using the Pepper's Ghost illusion. The theater plays *Remembering The Goddess Civilization*, a 10-minute video loop, featuring a video/audio collage of Marija Gimbutas explaining her theories and visuals of various Neolithic artifacts, including some of those also represented as 3D-prints or lasercut plywood, or

in the form of the theater itself. The curated selection of Gimbutas' speeches corresponds with the artifacts appearing projected in the illusion, to give context for the artifacts and provide an introduction to her work. A 3D-printed button in the controller table acts as a wireless pause/play trigger for the video loop and LED lights inside the theater, which viewers can toggle. Viewers are encouraged to interact with the 3D-printed figurines on the controller table, or even take them. Images of all six printed figurines are featured in the video projected in the Pepper's Ghost illusion, linking the visual and tactile aspects of the installation's user experience.

Gimbutas was regarded as an expert on European prehistory during the 1950's and 1960's, but in the 1970's her work on what she called the Goddess Civilization became associated with feminism, which began a period of intense backlash against her work. David Anthony states plainly that, "in American and Western European graduate programs in archeology for the past 30 years, Marija Gimbutas has been used as an object lesson on how not to do archeology."ⁱ After Gimbutas' death, her detractors were free to announce "fresh discoveries and conclusions about Neolithic societies which are, in truth, exactly what Gimbutas had discovered, observed, and written about decades earlier."ⁱⁱ The Historical Materialist Illusion Theater is intended to help make Gimbutas' work accessible to a non-expert public audience in the format of a museum or educational exhibition.



Marija Gimbutas and the impact of ancient DNA technology

The theater is a repository of artifacts from a time, if Marija Gimbutas' interpretation of prehistory is correct, before patriarchy and before warrior society. Gimbutas, whose work was essentially discarded by American archaeologists in the 1970's, argued that the Neolithic cultures of Europe before c. 4400 BCE enjoyed millennia of relatively uninterrupted peaceful living and achieved high levels of sophistication in art and design in an egalitarian and non-patriarchal social order she called Old Europe. Gimbutas argued that after c. 4400 BCE, the migration of what she called the Kurgan culture into Europe began, causing the destruction of Old Europe and the dispersal of the Indo-European family of languages:

“The clash between these two ideologies and social and economic structures led to the drastic transformation of Old Europe. These changes were expressed as the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal order, from a learned theocracy to a militant patriarchy, from a sexually balanced egalitarian society to a male-dominated hierarchy, and from a chthonic goddess religion to the [Indo-European] sky-oriented pantheon of gods.”ⁱⁱⁱ

From the 1950's until her death in 1994, Marija Gimbutas developed the Kurgan theory, in her words, “the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European culture based on archaeological materials.”^{iv} Debate over the identity of the speakers of Proto-Indo-European (PIE) has preoccupied western intellectual tradition for centuries. To identify the homeland of PIE and develop a theory for how it spread “is central to any explanation of how Europe became European. In a larger sense, it is a search for the

origins of western civilization.”^v Developments in DNA analysis over the past decade have vindicated Gimbutas’ Kurgan hypothesis, which explained the spread of Indo-European languages across Eurasia as the result of these massive migration out of the Pontic-Caspian Steppe.^{vi}



Above: Digital layout of the lasercut tableaux on the “stage” of the theater, featuring Old European artifacts on the left and Kurgan culture artifacts on the right.

This view was disregarded by most western archaeologists for decades, but modern archaeogenetic evidence suggests Gimbutas was correct to argue that these migrations occurred, and has led to a revival of interest in her work. Despite the new archaeogenetic evidence seen as supporting the Kurgan hypothesis, not all of

Gimbutas' theories have been embraced. She persistently argued that what she called the Goddess religion persisted into modern times in folklore and religious practices, despite Indo-Europeanization and Christianization. Other western archaeologists have denied the possibility of non-patriarchal societies or religion in the first place, or claim that definitive interpretation of prehistoric religion was impossible. Gimbutas controversially argued that it was possible to interpret prehistoric religion through an interdisciplinary approach she termed Archaeomythology, which incorporated archaeological evidence, historical records, linguistics, mythology, and folklore.

Historical Materialism and Gimbutas' Goddess Civilization



Above: Replicas of Neolithic figurines 3D-printed using recycled PLA, which are placed on the controller table for viewers to interact with.

What happened in prehistory will always be uncertain to some degree, but a historical materialist analysis of the Anthropocene embraces an evolutionary, rather than metaphysical, view of human society over the last 10,000 years.^{vii} The historical

materialism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels was materialist in that they were opposed to earlier metaphysical conceptions of nature, with the key factor in this philosophical approach being the Darwin's evolutionary theory: "Old materialism looked upon all previous history as a crude heap of irrationality and violence; modern materialism sees in it the process of evolution of humanity."^{viii} In this analysis, the dialectical relationship between material conditions and social conditions reflects a historical evolution of human society, and our modern material conditions are thus directly entwined with what happened in the Neolithic and earlier times.

Through analyzing the dialectical relationship between economic modes of production and the history of human structure, Marx and Engels developed a critique of capitalism and class society. The determining factor of history, Engels wrote, was "the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life", emphasizing that this was "of a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence [...] on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species."^{ix} Following the historical materialist analysis of Marx and Engels, the emergence of class society must have accompanied a change in both economic production and in biological reproduction. The changes in both the economic and social structure of Old Europe and West Asia continuum following the Kurgan migrations beginning represents a compelling explanation for the prehistoric origins of class society. Gimbutas was not a Marxist, nor could she be described as a materialist, but her theories about the conflict between Old Europe and the Kurgan culture align with what Marx and Engels argued; unlike the Processualist school of archaeology,

Gimbutas embraced a “conflictual, rather than consensual” view of the interactions between these prehistoric societies.^x

Processualist archaeology in the latter half of the 20th century, which rejected Gimbutas and materialism broadly, embraced an evolutionary model analogous to phyletic gradualism, a model which stemmed from Charles Darwin.^{xi} Archaeological evidence for changes in material culture were interpreted as the result of gradual social changes, not drastic admixture events between different populations. Modern archaeogenetic evidence has shown that a model of punctuated equilibrium is more suited to explaining the prehistoric interactions between Old Europe and the Kurgan culture.^{xii} Punctuated equilibrium divides the evolutionary process into periods of stasis followed by sudden and rapid speciation (relative to geological time). In the analogy to prehistoric archaeology, periods of social stasis are punctuated by periods of dramatic conflict and replacement or assimilation between different populations. That Gimbutas’ models were validated and the Processualist models were not supported by the DNA evidence suggests that Gimbutas’ broader theories must be re-evaluated in their totality. How these developments in ancient DNA will further support or disprove Gimbutas’ theories remains to be seen.

Next page: Images of Old European artifacts projected in the Pepper’s Ghost illusion, some of which are also represented with 3D-printed PLA or lasercut plywood.



Reproducing Prehistoric Art with Digital Design & Fabrication

The art of the European Neolithic often features precise patterns, textures and signs either sculpted in relief or painted. Gimbutas argued that these were not merely geometric motifs or decorations, but symbolic script signs which she associated with religious beliefs in divinity personified as woman. Rather than tracing these patterns “by hand” in CAD, computational vector tracing is used to duplicate these patterns and symbols from photographs and schematic drawings of artifacts and render them using CNC technology. Spirals, meanders, checkerboards, nets, and other geometric motifs persist for thousands of years in prehistory, and modern technology allows them to be reproduced and used as elements in the theater’s composition.

The front panel of the theater features a CNC-milled relief resembling a woman’s torso and legs and decorated with forms and symbols taken from a variety of Neolithic artifacts. A CNC-carved wooden mask tops the front panel. The surrounding patterns are not projected and instead follow the curvature of the panels. The figure depicted on the front of the theater is not based on singular artifact, but is rather the composition of features from several Old European figurines, pottery, and designs:

“The imagery of Neolithic art is overwhelmingly feminine: the female body, and particularly its generative parts- vulva and uterus or womb- are predominant. These symbols appear not only on figurines or larger sculptures of goddesses, but also on vases, cult equipment, and in tomb and temple architecture.”^{xiii}

Inside of the theater, the symbolic meeting of Old Europe and the Kurgan culture is portrayed on the stage, a historical event now understood through genetic evidence

as significant admixture between populations that had been genetically isolated from each other. Specific artifacts described by Gimbutas act as stand-ins for the populations that created them. On the left, a Gumelnița ceramic architectural model from Cascioarele, Romania, becomes a temple facade, and a Vinča figurine from Porodin, Macedonia, watches over the Old European side of the stage. On the Indo-European side of the stage, a Baden ceramic cart from Budakalász, Hungary towers over the Indo-European anthropomorphic stelae. A horse, taken from a relief on a Maikop vase from Russia accompanies the stelae. This tableau depicts these prehistoric interactions symbolically within the scheme that Gimbutas described; the material evidence from Old Europe and the Kurgan culture demonstrated fundamentally different religious beliefs, ideologies, social structures. These two broad cultural groups hybridized over the course of nearly two thousand years, and shaped the subsequent history that has followed to this present moment.

The Neolithic and our present times stand out as two periods of significant technological advancements almost without parallel in the history of *homo sapiens*. Developments in science and technology that led to the revitalization of Marija Gimbutas' Kurgan hypothesis also come with the results of globalized industrial capitalism, which has meant ecological catastrophe, increasing instability, and record levels of wealth disparity.^{xiv} Human activity, especially since the industrial revolution, has produced the material conditions that make possible the destruction of our own environment and species. European and American colonialism over the last 500 years imposed its economic ideology, along with Indo-European languages, on the indigenous populations of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Gimbutas writes, “we must refocus our collective memory. The necessity for this has never been greater as discover that the path of “progress” is extinguishing the very conditions for life on earth.” The Historical Materialist Illusion Theater is designed to help its viewers refocus that collective memory, and to engage with Gimbutas’ theories as part of a visual, audio, and tactile experience, but also the possibilities of digital fabrication technology. To reproduce artifacts from the Neolithic using CNC machines and digital media helps correct information asymmetries that make knowledge of prehistoric archaeology inaccessible outside of the world of academics and scholars. Especially with the rising importance of ancient DNA evidence and other data-driven approaches to prehistoric archaeology, the necessity of making this information accessible becomes critical. We have no shortage of data, but interpretations become increasingly difficult. Gimbutas was uncompromising in her belief that prehistoric social and spiritual life could be interpreted through interdisciplinary studies: “By ignoring the religious aspects of Neolithic life, we neglect the totality of culture. Archaeologists cannot remain scientific materialists forever.”^{xv} Now that ancient DNA has vindicated the Kurgan hypothesis, her work on the Goddess Civilization ought to finally be taken seriously, or at least read by the scholars who have dismissed her work for so long.^{xvi}



Above: 1989 Photograph of Marija Gimbutas at Newgrange, Co. Meath, Ireland. Source: [Michael Everson](#)

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- ⁱ Anthony 2022. Podcast interview with Razib Khan. [Online Source](#)
- ⁱⁱ Spretnak, Charlene. 2011. Anatomy of a Backlash: Concerning the Work of Marija Gimbutas. *The Journal of Archaeomythology*, Volume 7.
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- ^{iv} Gimbutas, 1993a. The Fall and Transformation of Old Europe. Revised and republished in *The Kurgan Culture and the Indo-Europeanization of Europe*, (eds. Miriam Robbins Dexter and Karlene Jones-Bley) 1997.
- ^v Mallory, James. 1973. A Short History of the Indo-European problem. *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*, Spring, 1973. Volume 1, Number 1.
- ^{vi} Reich, David. 2018a. "Ancient DNA Suggests Steppe Migrations Spread Indo-European Languages." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 162: 39-54.
- ^{vii} Smith, Sharon. 1997. Engels and the Origin of Women's Oppression. *International Socialist Review*, Issue 2, Fall 1997.
- ^{viii} Engels, Frederick. 1880. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*: [Online source](#)
- ^{ix} Engels, Friedrich. 1884. *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*: [Online source](#)
- ^x Kohl, P. L. 1981. Materialist Approaches in Prehistory *Annual Review of Anthropology* 1981, Vol. 10 (1981), pp. 89-118
- ^{xi} See Prothero, Donald. 1992. Punctuated Equilibrium At Twenty: A Paleontological Perspective *Skeptic* vol. 1, no. 3, Fall 1992, pp. 38-47.
- ^{xii} James P. Mallory has suggested the punctuated equilibrium analogy on Razib Khan's Unsupervised Learning Podcast. Web link: [James P. Mallory: Finding the Indo-Europeans](#)
- ^{xiii} Gimbutas, Marija, ed. Dexter, M. R. (1999). *The Living Goddesses*. University of California Press.
- ^{xiv} Gimbutas, 1991. *The Civilization of the Goddess*. introduction.
- ^{xv} Ibid.
- ^{xvi} Graeber, David, and Wengrow, David. 2021. *The Dawn of Everything*: 216.