Symbolic Collisions:
Short-Circuits in the Libidinal Economy

by

Alexis Wolfe

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2017

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

Department of Humanities

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

© Alexis Wolfe 2019

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Fall 2019

Approval

Name:	**Alexis Wolfe**
Degree:	**Master of Humanities**
Title:	**Symbolic Collisions: Short-Circuits in the Libidinal Economy**

Examining Committee: **Chair:**   Paul Dutton
Professor

Samir Gandesha
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor

Gary McCarron
Supervisor
Associate Professor, School of Communications

Svitlana Matviyenko
Internal Examiner
Assistant Professor, School of Communications

Date Defended/Approved: September 19, 2019

Abstract

The logic of late capitalism is a logic of deterritorialization, spurning demythologized, denarrativized and desacralized social relations that emanate from a collapsing symbolic order. Austere neoliberal political governance and the business ontology characterizing neoliberal ideology reduces all that exists on the symbolic plane to mere exchange value where the only subject position available is that of the consumer-spectator – libidinally mined for their addictive, and therefore highly profitable, disposition. At nearly every hour of the day, the debtor-addict subject experiences their attention solicited and short-circuited. In this process, the parasitical metaspectacle of platform capitalism short-circuits desire as well as reason, giving way to reactionary modes of thinking and acting. The dissolution of symbolic frameworks for sociality and total immersion in imaginary realms of relating seeds the soil of a fraught, fragmenting and therefore politically reactive social bond. This project traces, through a psychoanalytic lens, the tension between the imaginary and the symbolic emerging in an era dominated by rights discourse, where entitlements are contested, removed and granted at an accelerated cultural pace. It is within this tension that we find an increasing desire for representation as a victim in virtual spheres of competing symbolic orders. The central question of this project asks how economic antagonisms, issues of class, are continually inscribed, ignored and displaced into the realm of culture in a hyperperformative and informationally intoxicated social milieu.

Keywords: Lacan; populism; spectacle; symbolic order; neoliberalism

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Precarious Egos: Symbolic Misery

1.1. Introduction

Symbolic collisions animate political conflicts, virtual fields, social reality and plague psychic reality with ideological ambivalence. The symbolic fabric of post-industrial, pluralistic, technocratic societies has tears in substance, structure and coherence. These tears are met with attempts to restitch order back together – to fill in the symbolic gaps left by the deterritorializing force of capital. Because the symbolic dimension is fundamental and necessary to the organization of one's life, reactions to its decline in efficiency can be understood as attempts to recode experience with systems of meaning that are ideological, subcultural, consumerist, esoteric etc. This project will seek to depict and analyze the cultural manifestations of these efforts at reterritorialization, with particular attention paid to the digital social fields where the desire for meaning and order encounters its obstacle in the other. By first outlining this problematic with cultural examples and theoretical foregrounding, this project will develop an understanding of what is meant by 'symbolic collisions' so that the political implications of this scenario can be interpreted and understood in terms of their psychosocial consequences.

The first chapter will examine the crisis of democracy and establish its context by outlining the historical trade-off between meaning and freedom. This historical context will demonstrate that the eclipse of meaning by freedom engenders a new kind of a psychic and economic precarity which produce pathologies of culture that, more often than not, filter into political tensions. The aim of this initial chapter is to provide a theoretical framework based in a discussion of Lacan's three psychic registers: the Real, Symbolic and the Imaginary, and to examine the relationship between neoliberal ideology and austerity politics and 'declining symbolic efficiency.' This will be undertaken through an analysis of cultural phenomena which represent these entanglements, namely the incel community, Q anon conspiracy theorists, and the popularity of Jordan Peterson - all of which will receive an extended analysis in the chapters that follow. The dialectic that characterizes the

1

symbolic order is between the binary opposites: presence and absence. (Evans, 1996) The presence/absence of the father – the Real father, the Symbolic or even the Imaginary father – in forms ranging from that of a State leader, 'daddy', or God, will become central to unwinding culture's relationship to the symbolic order in an age of increasing abstraction and deterritorialization.

Further chapters will examine transformations in the libidinal economy initiated by the ontological shifts associated with symbolic decline. A detailed analysis of the attention economy and dwindling attention's relation to Freud's death drive and the depressive disposition permeating culture, along with a brief discussion of what is being called psychopolitics in chapter two will lead to a critique of spectacle-politics and the desublimation it instantiates in chapter three. In chapter three I will examine the burgeoning livestreaming phenomena in China alongside and analysis of Harmony Korine's *Mister Lonely* and Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* to introduce and define what I am calling the 'metaspectacle.' The final chapter, *Politics as Therapy,* will discuss the dialectically linked symbolic melancholia of the left and the right's nostalgic impulse to return to or resurrect elements of a previous symbolic order. Here, after an extended critique of identity politics and its associated 'culture war', I will argue, following Guy Standing, for a return to class politics, forged and fostered on the basis of symbolic identification.

1.2. Democracy in Crisis

The crisis of democracy is a function of a crisis in the symbolic order. Since the 1980s, public institutions in the West – spaces and structures that have historically worked to produce, ground, and sustain social ties – have been in a state of decay. Neoliberal austerity ushered in by a new regime of technocratic governance has left public schools underfunded, the welfare state in persistent deterioration and workers precariously undermined by enormous amounts of debt. Economic policy under the reign of neoliberal policy has identified the market as a natural mechanism. This naturalist conception consists of, in Wendy Brown's observation, "the dismantlement of social provision, progressive taxation and other instruments for redistributing wealth, on the one hand and the stimulation of the untrammeled activity of capital via deregulation of the health system,

2

labour, and the environment on the other" (2017, p. 37). We are, as Isabell Lorey declares, currently experiencing the 'return of mass vulnerability' – an accelerated and abject existence offering no relief from itself (2015, p. 53). Subjects of late capitalism are left without a ground to stand on as collective safeguarding systems have crumbled and wages have stagnated since the seventies, leaving the population defenseless as accidents, illness or unemployment can swiftly disintegrate one's economic security. Poverty haunts and compels workers to take on more jobs that are increasingly precarious.[1] The demoralizing effect this has on human relationships leads to the fraying of social bonds, heightened alienation, nihilism and escapism (*ibid.*, p. 51-53). A pervasive sense of fatalism intoxicates cultural production. Under the neoliberal regime one is compelled to mirror the fluctuating (manic/depressive) movements of the market as a deterritorialized "debtor-addict" subject – a node of consumer power, an object of biopolitical control, and source of attentional and libidinal energy (Fisher, 2009, p. 25). With economic precarity comes psychic insecurity.

That educational outcomes and interpersonal realities suffer under the neoliberal model implies that the symbolic and material conditions cannot be disentangled. Teachers across the United States cited inadequate conditions – roofs that cave in, dated textbooks, unlivable wages, insufficient budgets and overcrowded classrooms as reasons for their historic 2018 strikes.[2] Potentialities for intersubjectivity, imagination, and transformation are depressed and disarmed through the austere regulation and deprivation of neoliberal governance. The market does not bear the capacity to reflect upon its consequent distortions in human subjectivity, nor does it care unless the subject in question is established and actively deployed as a consumer with disposable income. Interpellated as a consumer, the debtor-addict subject learns to vote and speak about politics as if it were a game or gamble – losing hope and cynically speculating as to whether or not politics might, in the end, be nothing but a circus – a spectacle for consumption, an object of conversation,

---

[1] Think of jobs in the sharing economy (ride-sharing, food-delivery, etc.), as secondary (or even tertiary) forms of employment.

[2] These strikes began on February 22, 2018 and ended in March 7, starting in West Virginia and growing to include statewide strikes in Oklahoma and Arizona. Protests occurred in Kentucky, North Carolina and Colorado as well. At large, these strikes were considered a success by labour activists.
Source*: Requiem for a Strike*. The New Republic. (March, 2018). Link:
https://newrepublic/article/147307/cost-west-virginia-teachers-strike.

rather than a potentially emancipatory container for social and economic change. Wendy Brown suggests that government itself is sold to the consumer gaze, as though it were a commodity, not quite escaping the transactional logic of exchange (2015). For many, democracy now appears as a repetitive, yet enthralling (or exhausting) theatrical production – a series of unconvincing (or all too convincing) spectacles or perhaps as a failed, demystified utopian project.

A sense of powerlessness sets in while citizens, conceived of as consumers, observe and experience the "withering away of the state...to its core military and police functions" (Fisher, 2009, p. 2). The state, in its most neoliberal species, becomes fixated on its disciplinary (police and military) functions and relies upon 'precarization' as a mode of governance. The combination of the threat of economic insecurity and intimidation with violence is the state's response to the structural problems endemic to a recognition of its citizen's 'vulnerability'. Preferring to manage precarity (decoded flows), the state doubles down on surveillance and biopolitical governance rather than work to address the root of the chaos or 'deviance' it has sown through the production of inequalities (Lorey, 2015, p. 27). Abandoned to the violence of market forces and a reign of one-dimensional, calculative reason, subjects of late capitalism are without social security, navigating a precarious terrain of individualized responsibility but continually reminded, at every turn, that *this is freedom!* and it could never be any other way (Marcuse, 1964).

By demanding dispositions of 'flexibility', 'nomadism' and 'spontaneity' to succeed (read: survive) in a "post-Fordist control society", the conditions of neoliberalism dismantle symbolic modes of relating (Fisher, 2009, p. 28). Symbolic modes of relation require duration, commitment, narrative continuity, expression, ritual and logics of communication that exceed the instrumental aims of mere exchange relations. The crisis of 'commons' (public infrastructure and institutions) and privatization of psychic, social and cultural existence initiates a swift decline in social trust, stable structures of kinship, belief in political processes and cogent anchors of meaning that manage to transcend the hollow meanings derived from within the symbolic corpse found in the permeating force of a consumer paradigm.

The material conditions of severe economic inequality, imposed scarcity, and an expanding and highly-visible gap between projected social rewards and the means to

achieve these rewards are neglected while compensatory vehicles of novelty – varied forms of distractive bait (immersive spectacles, commodities) that induce *forgetting* and compliance – are shored up from within the entertainment matrix and relied upon to deflect energy from the symbolic and economic misery that has set in. Such conditions leave the youth of Western 'democracies' in unrest, without economic prospects, isolated in an epidemic of loneliness and experiencing profound and alarming levels of alienation from themselves, the world, and each other. Inculcated with neoliberalism's "entrepreneurial fantasy" despite the reality of downward mobility, generations y and z are forced to accept and tolerate the "vast privatization of stress" while navigating precarious work lives and a deterritorialized, hyper-ironized and nostalgic social field (Fisher, 2009, p. 19, 36). This process of deterritorialization produces sociopathologies that must be understood as emanating from historical transformations.

1.3. Deterritorialization in History

Economic deterritorialization operates in tandem with symbolic deterritorialization. These processes are linked in an accelerating dialectical relationship. Deterritorialization is not a new phenomenon, Deleuze and Guattari depict its role in relation to capital in *'Anti-Oedipus'*, however, its process has been unweaving symbolic webs since the advent of capitalism. As a historical process, deterritorialization begins to unravel sociosymbolic conventions in the late 15th and 16th century Europe with the shift from a medieval to capitalist mode of social relations (Fromm, 1965). This shift involved an increase in both "spiritual" and "economic" individualism, wherein, as Erich Fromm describes, "economic activity, success and material gains" become ends in themselves rather than means to a desired end (1965, p. 130). As the role of capital shifts from being a servant of man to his master, man has effectively "lost his fixed place in a closed world" and subsequently, by the middle ages, lost "the answer to meaning in his life" (*ibid*., p. 80). Marx and Engels depict the crisis this provokes as they examine the conditions of 19th century capitalist Europe. This effect can be summarized in their statement that "all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with senses, his real

5

conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (2008, p. 6). Whether or not we can gain access to the world through our so-called 'sober senses', or if the *Imaginary* and *Symbolic* registers of the psyche rely upon fantasies – religious, political, neurotic etc. – to shield us from the "traumatic Real" is worth interrogating (Žižek, 1991). History, upon examination, depicts a series of escapes from sobriety – endless attempts by individuals and groups to manufacture and inhabit symbolic fantasies the quell the swarming ontological uncertainties, loneliness and the sense of isolation endemic to 'sober senses.'

Without social fixity, a new and profound sense of precarity and aloneness sets in. With money declared the "great equalizer of man", deterministic categories of birth and caste were abandoned as relics and the slow creep of the performance principle – the injunction to produce, appear successful, excel, and compete – begins to exert pressure on psychic and social apparatuses. By the 18th century, liberalism and its bourgeois ethos became hegemonic, and the 'happiness' of a state's population involved a new method of governance where self-limiting governing techniques in favour of the free market on one hand, and population-subjects who were bound to thinking and acting primarily in correspondence to an economic paradigm on the other, define a closed-circuit of biopolitical precarization (Lorey, 2015, p. 24). With this liberal form of governance and ideology, one's failures became purely one's own responsibility, the individual's undoing was consequent upon their failure to internalize the 'rational' forces of the market or, worse, a sign of inherent degeneracy. As property took on more "anthropological significance" at the beginning of modernity, the traditional system of "subordination and security" was replaced by an "independent and detached" management of one's precarity, where self-relations were based structurally on a relation to "one's own body as a means of production" (*ibid*., p. 29). The transition from security to precarity unfolds as both the template for human nature and the mode of governance becomes reified – all becomes consumable, understood as things to be attained, and exchange. The self is perceived primarily as an economic instrument and, consequently, loses its dialectical specificity—the dynamic between meaning and *becoming*.

The relationship between being and becoming short-circuits once the human subject becomes reified as fundamentally competitive and discrete from his fellow man. This short-circuit is initiated by the process of deterritorialization – a de-sensualization,

6

demythologization, and delocalization of existence that is concurrent with industrial capitalism and subsequent globalization. For the purposes of this project the use of this term will describe a systematic levelling out of experience to its instrumental capacity, a reduction of language to its mechanical function, to its symptom, and an elimination of the relation between language and the unconscious (Lacan, 1975). Capitalism, for Deleuze and Guattari, is defined by "decoded flows" – the release of libidinal energy from rigid codes into indeterminate relations with abstract capital – "the new massive deterritorialization" (1972, p. 224). We can think of two forms of deterritorialization, highlighted in *Anti-Oedipus*: private property and commodity production. These represent forms of decoding or a release from patterns installed by regimes of locality and feudal authority, a dissociation of culture from social and geographic territorialities. This dissociation introduces a new texture of space by unbinding previous experiences of proximity and distance, local and global etc. Capitalism is the only social machine constructed on the basis of decoded flows and the continuous conjunction of these flows form an axiomatic of abstract quantities that, rather than code desire, transmute it into the form of money (*ibid*., p. 139). Deleuze and Guattari explain that deterritorialized, capitalist existence is an ongoing and contingent encounter between two "principal elements": the "deterritorialized workers who have become free and naked, having to sell their labour capacity" and "decoded money that has become capital and is capable of buying it" (*ibid*., 225). These vicious and despairingly hollow dynamics, following Nietzsche, constitute an "age of cynicism where "civilized European man" is defined by "cynical tactics and bad conscience" (*ibid*., p. 268).

Capital "frees" the worker from ownership of the means of production because it operates through the extraction and appropriation of surplus value from abstract labour. The worker now effectively *chooses* who owns him, rather than find himself birthed into a specific role (Marx and Engels, 2008, p. 14). Classes are, for Deleuze and Guattari, the "negative of castes and statuses; classes are orders, castes and statuses that have been decoded", classes exist as a remainder after symbolic death (1972, p. 254). The relative freedom of class over caste brings with it a violent dislocation, de-contextualization and atomization for both the subject and the sociosymbolic field he inhabits. This new freedom

7

(and insecurity) is delivered through processes of deterritorialization which operate through the logic of exchange and the commodity form.

As Marx and Engels predicted, capital activates and accelerates the dissolution of symbolic referents. Mark Fisher concurs in stating that capitalism effectively "desacralizes culture", converting "practices and rituals" into "mere aesthetic objects" making the "belief of previous cultures objectively ironized, transformed into artifacts" (2009, p. 9). Desacralization releases the individual from the connective tissue of history – the psychosocial glue constituted by intentionally shared practices, aims and rituals – which obstruct the potential for collective political aims such as a worker's movement. It involves a reduction of experience to the plane of the profane. Desacralization is a form of decoding, dissolving the affective intensities and social consistency produced by sacred objects and projects. In this way, the loss of the sacred lessens the sense of responsibility of man toward man and man toward himself, it garners a purely functional regime of sociality, distancing man further and further from the beyond.

The regime of decoding suits the consumerist model of late capitalism insofar as the affective environment – excesses of despair, loneliness, self-loathing and longing for connection – are met with formulas of satiation held within the multitudinous forms of commodities (commodified objects and experience: i.e., sex, exotic travel, luxury brands, extreme sports, etc.) that are so prolific and responsive to lack and so ubiquitous as ready-made-remedy. This process involves a kind of short-circuiting desire and therefore a destabilization of the social and psychic structure to one's life.

1.4. Symbolic Decline

The compensatory nature of consumerist hedonism could be read as a symptom of 'declining symbolic efficiency' or 'symbolic misery' (Žižek, 1991; Stiegler, 2015). Alternatively, advertising and mass media, together, produce *reterritorializations* in the psychosocial sphere in step with finance capitalism's deterritorialization of it. It is an endlessly generative system: to strip bare the meanings that constitute intersubjectivity only to supply replacements in simulacra (i.e., hipster culture, nostalgic media, new urbanism) that resurrect their structure. The decline of symbolic efficiency or 'crisis of the big Other'

8

describes the way in which symbolic meanings from cultural memory are extracted from social systems, commodified and projected through the logic of exchange as opaque fragments of humanity's lost relationship to higher orders of metaphysical, spiritual and social significance. That one can simply purchase the aesthetic semblance of a persona reminiscent of a prior historical or distant cultural phenomenon illustrates how overpromixity and immediacy negate the presence of 'sacred' notions and 'symbolic' frameworks. The totalizing force of consumer capitalism contributes to a sense of declining symbolic efficiency – a flatlining of meaning.

The collapse of the medieval social system, and the beginnings of capitalism dissolved traditional structures of kinship and loosened 'primary ties': man was both more free and more alone; the paradise that was feudal fixity and order was lost for good (Fromm, 1965). This negative freedom produces novel forms of psychosocial insecurity; the structure of desire, action and choice were no longer imposed on and given to the individual but instead, the primary demand from society was for *production*. The individual must produce himself and his life's conditions, it is him and only him who can do this. Through this, the schematic of psychic space was altered insofar as new responsibilities were instituted while prior securities, material and psychological, were disassembled. The ontological insecurity cultivated by such conditions exposes individuals and groups to new psychic vulnerabilities – energies or intensities – on which new, spontaneous and decentering symbolic orders could ignite their cause.

1.5. Substitute Satisfactions: Luther and Calvin

During the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the symbolic structure was destabilized and less defined (decoded), creating space for the doctrines of Luther and Calvin to give expression and shape to an emergent sense of isolation and powerlessness in the new deterritorializing capitalist regime. Fromm writes, "Protestantism was the answer to the human needs of the frightened, uprooted, and isolated individual who had to orient and relate himself to a new world", providing rationalizations for the middle class "attitudes of resentment, moral indignation, hostility, anxiety and insignificance" consequent of the negative freedom of capitalist relations (*ibid.*, p. 121-123). Freud

explains that "substitute satisfactions" can "diminish" the misery of a life that is "too hard for us; brings us many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks" (1930, p. 728). Freud is well aware, in his late essay '*Civilization and its Discontents*', that *structures* can remain despite their shifting content (1930). For example, he cites religion's technique as consisting "in depressing the value of life and distorting the picture of the real world in a delusional manner", thereby "forcibly fixing (one) in a state of psychical infantilism" so by drawing groups into mass-delusion, religion succeeds in sparing many people from "individual neurosis" (1930, p. 734-35). Fromm defines religion as "any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of orientation and an object of devotion", thus, the symbolic referents of a religion are necessarily social and therefore implicated in desiring-production (1950, p. 21). This echoes Žižek's idea that it is precisely "through fantasy that we learn how to desire" (1991, p. 6). Fantasy structures desire by specifying its object and giving the subject symbolic (linguistic, social) coordinates through which desire can be articulated and understood (*ibid*., p. 6). As feudal structures collapse, they leave behind an energetic, affective residue that yearns and searches for new containers and categories to absorb, orient and channel its force.

Conditions of "uprootedness" and "alienation" are met with an intense and unwavering desire for social belonging, meaning, recognition and metaphysical security. The fall of the European hierarchal feudal order left a vacuum for new webs of signification, still animated by the structure of submission and domination (sadism, masochism, hierarchy), for new schemas of salvation to fill. With this in mind, we might speculate that the ideological fantasies that absorb and organize the shapeless and disaffected and disempowered masses of today (think the identitarian left, the 'alt-right' or 'QAnon' conspiracy theorists[3]) follow a similar trajectory.[4]

---

[3] QAnon (also called "The Storm" and "The Great Awakening") refers to a conspiracy theory where Q, a pseudonymous individual has garnered a considerably large American following after the election of Donald Trump. Q releases cryptic posts on Reddit and 4chan forums based on information allegedly gleaned from classified information involving the Trump administration and his supporters and their 'deep state' opposition. The posts have accused several Hollywood actors, politicians and other high-ranking officials of engaging in an international sex trafficking ring.
Source: https://www.vox.com/2018/8/8/17657800/qanon-reddit-conspiracy-data

[4] Granted that conspiracy theories, in their role at absorbing and organizing the worldview of groups, stretch back to the ancient world, there is still a somewhat profound reinvigoration of conspiracy theories, nourished by digital communications, that has gained (and is gaining) significant political relevance.

1.6. Slouching Towards Fantasy

Ideological rigidity takes its grasp as religious doctrines lose cultural relevance[5]
and the reign of neoliberalism, with its intensified demand for self-responsibility (the
subject as entrepreneur of his labour power/brand) alongside increased austerity opens up
new psychic wounds and vulnerabilities in human subjectivity (Dardot and Laval, 2017, p.
286).

Figure 1.1.   QAnon Conspiracy Map
Source: https://deepstatemappingproject.com

---

[5] Or, in some cases, reactions to neoliberalism and the deterritorialization it exacts take the form of religious
fundamentalism – extremists double down and instrumentalize orthodox doctrine toward political
domination, the popularity of ISIS/ISIL and the Hindutva (Hindu Nationalism) being contemporary examples
of this.

Fantasy is the "symbolic quality of experience" (Brown, 1959, p. 167). Whether it be religious, metaphysical, romantic, or ideological, fantasy works to fill the void of purely instrumental and calculative social relations by applying collective (and private) meanings and assigning theological metaphysical or political rationalizations to the irrational forces of capital. By procuring "frame and consistency" for reality, fantasy fills ontological gaps left by failing institutions by prescribing fixed positions of identity that generate a sense of belonging to a social or metaphysical totality (Žižek, 1991, p. 147).

The "global apparatus" of neoliberalism, "generates pathological effects" which, according to Dardot and Laval, "all have one thing in common: they can all be related to the erosion of the institutional frameworks and symbolic structures in which subjects found their place and identity" (2017, p. 288). The erosion of institutional frameworks or the "mutation of the institution into the enterprise" can be described as a process of deterritorialization as the relations and identities of the subject are continuously repositioned in accordance with the "performance" of the subject as entrepreneur (*ibid.*, 288). This model, interpellating the multitudinous subject as one-dimensional "human capital" and delineating the project of "personal enterprise" through the injunction to compete (with oneself and with others) induces an atmospheric sense of precarity, paranoiac notions of inadequacy and devastating self-isolation that can be understood as a response to both symbolic and material uncertainty (*ibid.*, 285).

1.7. The Machinic Turn

The loss constitutive of the process of deterritorialization is, to use Bernard Stiegler's articulation, a loss of "aesthetic participation", leading to psychological and libidinal misery (2015, p. 23). Stiegler sees the loss of the producer's 'working knowledge' (technical skills) and the consumer's deprivation of the opportunity to participate in "aesthetic occurrence" as a consequence of the transformation of the world of work by machines, starting in the 19th century (*ibid.*, p. 23). He calls the subjective state consequent upon the machinic turn a condition of *symbolic misery*. The symbolic, in this formation, is a logical and semiotic horizon that conditions a circuit of sensibility which, in Stiegler's

12

theory, is the principle process in the unfolding of 'individuation' (*ibid.*, 31). Privileging Dionysian expression over Apollonian repression, Stiegler sees the process of individuation as a continuous yet contingent series of generative expressive *acts*; one is in *excess* of himself, this excess is the "very manifestation of his *existence'* in which he becomes what he is by *exteriorizing* himself, which is also to say, *exclaiming* himself, and as he exclaims the "sensational singularity" which involves the creation of desire (*ibid.*, p. 42). This 'exclamation' following the transformation of lack into excess and the positing of an object of desire is the pathway through which the "circuit of affects" which "weave the motives" of psychosocial individuation (*ibid.*, p. 42). Alternatively, symbolic misery blocks this process as soon as individuals have become 'indifferent to the flux', nihilistic in relation to the potential of expression, inhibited, without a vision for the 'sensational singularities' that persist and without the motivation to understand *why*. Such misery is born of the regelation of the human to assistant, or appendage to the machine, his internalization of an inferior, if not redundant position and the infiltration of *lack* into imaginative, relational and symbolic contexts.

The aesthetico-libidinal model of capitalism consumes libidinal energy to reproduce itself in channels (for decoded flows) that it has designed with limits and controls. The feeling of *becoming-redundant*, if not totally 'burdensome' – statuses imbued with a sense of economic insecurity and existential anxiety – terrorizes the psychosocial field. The ideals of yesterday disintegrate with any close inspection and the project of imagining new ideals to replace and motivate action becomes convincingly overwhelming. Individuation (excess-existence-exteriorization-exclamation-desire) as a process worth pursuing becomes practically superfluous, appearing utterly inessential when the future has been foreclosed and there is nothing but the circulation of ironic, nihilistic 'hot-takes' to replace it. Without an object of desire (an object of libidinal investment that presupposes a future reward) there is nothing to bind the particular to the universal, humans to each other or the present to future. Christopher Lasch sees the "widespread loss of confidence in the future" as generated by the fact that neoliberal economics leaves both the poor and middle class in a state of "living for the present" where a "desperate concern for personal survival, sometimes disguised as hedonism" engulfs a large majority of the population (1979, p.

129). Lost confidence in the future is felt on a psychic level as a foreclosure of the symbolic dimension of one's life – a logical and semiotic horizon of *meaning*. This loss contributes to the disarming of the radical potentiality in expressive modes of enunciation and the reduction of life to a series of discontinuous, empty, uninspiring 'presents'.

1.8.   The Search for Meaning: Reterritorialization

"What civilized modern societies deterritorialize with one hand they reterritorialize with the other", write Deleuze and Guattari (1972, p. 257). At stake is the sense of meaning. For Lacan, meaning is conditioned through an entanglement of the *Imaginary* and the *Symbolic* registers of the psyche (Seminar X, X8). Western culture's simultaneous decline of symbolic structures and its seduction into near-total immersion in the imaginary universe of the entertainment matrix produces a complicated relationship between the subject and 'meaning'. Without the negativity of the symbolic, images are pure positivity, appearing simply as information (Han, 2012, p. 51). By virtue of its exclusive nature, the symbolic injects the negative into the sheer, undifferentiated plenitude that is the Real. The Real is the chaotic void that formulations of 'reality' must suppress. For Lacan, the Real and truth are not synonymous. In seminar 10, *'From the Unconscious to the Real',* Lacan invites students to think of reality as "what functions truthfully" but realize that "what truly functions has nothing to do with the Real" (1976, X7). "My Real", he says, "conditions reality", thus, the *"tongue is living"*, always giving rise to symptomatic responses to the Real and calling it "reality" (*ibid.*, X7). This implies that perceptual reality is always mediated ideologically. Alenka Zupancic sees psychoanalysis' positing of a reality principle as an invitation to be 'suspicious of any reality that presents itself as natural" (Fisher, 2009, p. 17). This ideological and therefore symbolic mediation is necessary in order for the subject to gain distance from the Real and stave off any intrusions of its presence from consciousness. "Meaning", Lacan holds, is always "the Other of the Real" as the Real is, by its very essence, deprived of meaning (*ibid.*, X8). But still, meaning is necessary insofar as it becomes the means to conceal that there is no Other of the Other – no order of existence, it is a symbolic substance that installs ontological systems. We cannot know the Real in itself so we are doomed to project onto it a symbolic meaning and

thus, immediately render it by a "symbolic form" so that we can inter*act with* the world (Žižek, 1991, p. 39). Symbolic forms provide scripts that collapse interpretive potentiality into a social axiomatic that effectively filters information and identify where meaning can be located and thus, what to desire. But what are these symbolic webs composed of and from where do they derive their form?

1.9.   Daddy Issues

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the symbolic register of the psyche is produced through the *Name-of-the-Father*; it is the father's law which provides moral and epistemic certainty – compensating for or veiling the paradoxical ambiguity of existence by delineating systems of rationalizations that appear and get reproduced in the social axiomatic as universal, ontological truths. Together, these rationalizations coalesce and posit what Lacan calls the 'big Other' qua symbolic order. Composed of socio-linguistic structures, the big Other is grounded in a paternal law, regulates intersubjective relations and acts as an authority on knowledge. Our connection to the symbolic is arranged through our reaction to the big Other – which is always a reaction to our concept of (our projection of) the big Other's perception of ourselves. We search for the presence of the big Other because we crave interpellation and seek out an Other who can, in a generalized, objectified way, confer symbolic identification on us (Žižek, 1991, p. 109). Entrance into a symbolic network, as Žižek explains, makes things *more than themselves,* which can elicit the feeling of being present and more than oneself – a hero for example (*ibid.*, p. 134).

Articulated through the Name-of-the-Father, the big Other weaves the symbolic fabric of human subjectivity and, as Žižek explains is always a "retroactive illusion" that structures social reality, in order to mask "the contingency of the Real" (1991, p. 71). There are always two deaths: the organic, biological death and the symbolic death. The schematic of the Western symbolic is a result of, following Freud's thesis in *'Totem and Taboo',* the murder of the "primeval father" which is then "integrated into the symbolic universe insofar as the dead father begins to reign as the symbolic agency of the Name-of-the-Father" (Žižek, 1991, p. 23). But in this way, the symbolic father is always "more father than the father himself" as well – the "paternal metaphor" begins, as Freud sees it,

following the primordial patricide when the "dead father returns stronger than when he was alive" (Žižek, 1991, p. 135). The paternal metaphor is a symptom, Žižek says, insofar as it is the "return of the repressed" – the 'Father-Enjoyment' that terrorized the horde in *Totem and Taboo* by monopolizing the sexual field haunts as a spectre in the Name-of-the-Father as a reminder of the guilt and impotence through which the symbolic has been constituted. In Seminar VIII on the Foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father Lacan explains that the Name-of-the-Father is the text of the law grounded in the father insofar as he is dead, but more than that, it is "the essential signifier within the other" (1958, p. 104). It is through the "primordial symbolic ideal" that the signifying chain reaches the other – the symbolic structures the code through which messages must pass in order to resonate harmoniously between two subjects (*ibid.*, p. 104). "Every possible satisfaction of human desire" says Lacan, "is going to depend on the harmony of the signifying system insofar as it is articulated in the word of the subject" (Seminar VIII, 1958, p. 105). Thus, the Name-of-the-Father establishes master signifiers that compose a big Other which, over time, structures societies and distributes the satisfaction of human desire. And while we can never confront the big Other directly, we do, at every turn, encounter its "stand-ins": God, Nature, History, Society, The State, Science etc. (Fisher, 2009, p. 44).

But why is it the figure of the dead primeval father who structures the symbolic network? Lacan's psychoanalytic understanding of the symbolic father as it relates to the phallic signifier is critical in understanding this question. Lacan regards the "characteristic of the signifier" as discontinuous – the paternal or 'phallic' signifier situated in the unconscious is one that is always "substituted for another signifier" as a means to cover up the "lack" inherent to the process of symbolization (Seminar XI, 1958, p. 125). In this way, the paternal metaphor as a signifier covers the lack and *is* the lack simultaneously – it is a projection of virility, order and power to fill the gaps. So, the symbolic order is always necessarily incomplete, and yet its articulation through the Name-of-the-Father can culminate in peaks of fullness and presence in language (in the medieval period for example) and collapse as a reminder of absence as it does now in deterritorialized post-industrial capitalism. The paternal metaphor operates discontinuously whether or not the actual father, the real father is present or not. And still, it is worth depicting cultural shifts

at the level of the Real when discussing this presence/absence dialectic to consider the symbolic and imaginary conditions they impose.

In his 1963 book, *Society Without the Father,* German social psychologist Alexander Mitscherlich analyzes this dialectic and depicts its social consequences. "The patriarchal structural components of our society", he writes, "are closely associated with magical thought", assuming the omnipotence-impotence relationship between father and son, and extending to characterize the relationship between God and man, ruler and ruled etc. (1969, p. 145). For centuries, power to subjugate through an institutionalized principle of 'natural hierarchy' has been the historical force behind Western modes of social organization. The figure of the father, established in *imagos* of God or the familial father (or both) determines the demand and reasons for instinctual renunciation and in return, promises protections. This is the origin of the superego – an internalized chain of signifiers which contain within them the limits of social freedom (prohibition) and the moral script for one's life (permission) – society's agent residing in the mind. The father's temperament and authority becomes a model for the child's (the son in most psychoanalytic literature) ego-ideal, his fantasy self, and structures his wishes and desires. Throughout the history of Western civilization, it was "father knows best" – a consequence that, as Mitscherlich points out, likely emanates from the fact that most cultural and practical knowledge throughout history has been transmitted through father figures (*ibid*., p. 146). Institutionalization of the father's achievements gave 'objective weight' to his natural positionality. Thus, the logic inherent to the Name-of-the-Father is what, in the Western cultural apparatus, has historically constituted the symbolic order. In oedipal society it designates where meaning is to be found and where it is not. It is the logic producing 'Jesus-son-of-God' triangulation in theology and it can be found whenever naturalist, fatalistic, determinist and essentialist claims are made in service to the maintenance and assertion of power.

Additionally, paternal authority structures individual and social relationships to knowledge. Žižek claims that the 'experts' and officials that we encounter, are "engaged in acts of interpretation about what the big Other's intentions may be, allowing the subject to defer responsibility and achieve a sense of ontological security by deferring to and regarding these officials with reverence as authorities on 'knowing' (1991, p. 49). Despite

the interpassive character of belief in the big Other (it is enough to believe that the other believes (for us) for the belief to maintain its currency), such belief nonetheless manages to sustain social networks so that individual subjects can (through experiences of solidarity or trust) participate in collective energies that can be directed toward singularities of ideality. These singularities afford access to a sense of ontological, epistemological, existential and moral orientation and therefore conjure an experience of that mysterious *objet petit a*: meaning. Simply put, the symbolic is a means to codify one's existence in something 'objective' and external from oneself. Lacan explains that the symbolic function has a two-fold movement. First, "man makes his own action into an object", but only to "return its foundational place to it in due time", to produce a sense of belonging in the social and natural world (Lacan, 2002, p. 72). It is a self-reinforcing feedback loop, reliant upon intensities of interpassive belief and processes of exclusion. But this loop is always vulnerable to the disorienting intrusion of alternative symbolic narratives. There are always what Deleuze and Guattari might call breaks, or Foucauldian ruptures to this loop, and consequently, the sociolinguistic texture is subject to shifts as the efficiency of the symbolic order starts to dwindle under scrutiny.

1.10. Postmodernism, or Reflexive Impotence

"Postmodernism," according to Mark Fisher, can refer to the "complex of crises that the decline in the belief in the big Other has triggered" (2009, p. 45). The hyperreal relations of abstract capital and hyperironized relations induced by a hyperreflexive, commodified and reified cultural matrix negate the possibility of both 'authentic belief' and universal ideals. Postmodernism, or the "cultural logic of late capitalism" with its "reflexive impotence" and "schizophrenic socius" completes the subjective fragmentation characteristic of modernity and leaves the subject in a state of paralysis and destitution (Dean, 2010; Jameson, 1991; Deleuze and Guattari, 1972; Taylor, 1991). Optimism, belief, libidinal and imaginative investments in political projects and cultural experience are dismantled as liberatory projects as soon as they are assimilated into the depotentiating machine of consumer culture. The engulfing spectacle that permeates both conscious and unconscious fields of sociality reduces all relation to observation (consumption – of

images, of energy), making embodiment, presence and therefore agency, increasingly abstract and difficult states (of being) to access.

In the *Schema of Mass Culture* Adorno describes the way in which all "real conflicts" become invisible, replaced by a more visible "surrogate of shocks and sensations without real consequences" which "smoothly" insinuate themselves into "the episodic action" constitutive of the culture industry (1991, p. 60). Adorno was disclosing the "pre-digested" quality of mass culture, suggesting that human cultural production was suffering a crisis of novelty under capitalism's "monopolistic hold" on which it tended to dismiss anything that could not immediately be grasped without explicit reference to what had already been produced (*ibid*., p. 56-59). Understandably such a crisis, one which can be understood as part of the "complex of crises" Fisher refers to, produces a sense of apathy, if not nihilistic boredom. The 'objective spirit' constitutive of the big Other – a force that animates from outside and distributes incentives to relate creatively to the world and to oneself – loses potency, that is, loses potential when the culture has been trapped in a reflective gaze upon itself for decades. Deconstructionism can only go so far in treating symbolic misery, if it is not actively participating in its proliferation. Once all of life has been translated into imaginary terms, absent of symbolic needles to pin down meaning, the structure of knowledge, desire, choice and action unravel. The search for novelty is a search for untapped symbolic resonance.

Like postmodern theory, the Enlightenment's strengthening of conscious critical capacities started a trend towards relativizing (revealing) the omnipotence-impotence (master/slave) relational dynamic (Mitscherlich, 1969, p. 145; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). While 'reason' as a signifier still carries conscious and unconscious baggage from the patriarchal (feudal) structures of the middle ages, it nonetheless catalyzed transformative and emancipatory political and social events. "Conscious critical capacities", according to Mitscherlich, started to make filial dependence and paternal authority seem less necessary and permanent (*ibid*., p. 145). He cites the "progressive fragmentation of labour", mass production, "complicated administration" the transition from independent producer to wage-worker/consumer (debtor-addict) and the separation of home from a place of work as elements of the "progressive loss of the father's authority and the diminution of his power in the family and over the family" (*ibid*., p. 147). American

psyches or 'cultural behaviour', however, have taken on the tune of mere contempt in light of this. Mitscherlich writes,

> Present day American culture is no longer motivated by rivalry with the father arising from ambivalence between respect and hatred of him. What is taking place is centered elsewhere, and incidentally includes a non-respect for the father which is associated with very little affect indeed. American cultural development was undoubtedly set in train by the revolt against the British autocracy, but the Declaration of Independence was followed by an involvement of the self in new ways of tackling life that ended by allowing the efficacy of a vital ingredient of traditional culture, the father's authority, to wither away unpunished - at any rate by the fathers themselves. (p. 147)

This reversal is a movement initiated by the process of deterritorialization. Here, the "father's authority loses its substance" and is relegated to the status of relic. Historically, the process continues in this way. Similar dynamics can be observed in the specific technocratic rationality (techno utopian) of Silicon Valley where 'Tech Billionaires' kill the 'father' of the State to install a disciplinary paternalistic regime whose structure only seems to extend, obscure and enhance its logic (think neo-aristocratic tech startups[6]). Mitscherlich explores the social patterns of work to discuss the way in which technological development eliminates traditional forms of social reality through the alteration of spatial relationships. He sees that in industrial society (as opposed to agrarian societies) men worked for wages, away from the home, selling their time without any ounce of individual expression made available to them (*ibid*., p. 156). Mitscherlich neither celebrates nor disparages this new, fragmented existence, reminding that "the optimism with which mechanization is pursued is the measure of man's suffering under the old yoke" (*ibid*., p. 157). Still, he recognizes that this new arrangement leaves the father in a permanent state of frustration at the alienation he's forced to submit himself to – he is

---

[6] Consider this quote from the 2013 TechCrunch Article *"Geeks for Monarchy: The Rise of the Neoreactionaries":* "Demotist systems, that is, systems ruled by the 'People,' such as Democracy and Communism, are predictably less financially stable than aristocratic systems," 'dark enlightenment' thinker Michael Anissimov writes. "On average, they undergo more recessions and hold more debt. They are more susceptible to market crashes. They waste more resources. Each dollar goes further towards improving standard of living for the average person in an aristocratic system than in a Democratic one."
(*TechCrunch*, November, 2013, Clint Finley. Source: https://techcrunch.com/2013/11/22/geeks-for-monarchy/)

awash in symbolic misery. A growing sense of resentment builds as the distribution of prestige becomes a site of anxiety and guilt.

The father, as a wage-laborer is economically castrated, a player in someone else's game, never of his own design, cut off from aesthetic participation. More concretely, with regards to identity-formation, Mitscherlich sees the new world of specialized work (office jobs) as a "separation of the father's world from the child's" (*ibid*., p. 155). He posits that the process of identity-formation is interrupted by this distance between lifeworlds and "instead of seeing and getting to know his father in his working world, too much is left to his fantasy" (*ibid*., p. 155). Christopher Lasch affirms this, stating that the decline of institutionalized authority leads to a loss of the parental ego which leaves the child to derive his superego from "primitive fantasies about his parents" which, Lasch sees as charged with "sadistic rage" rather than a loving or respected model of social conduct (1979, p. 40). Fantasy, here can be read as expectations – the son's ego-ideal, that is, his internalization of others' expectations and admired traits, (tied to identification the father) causes him to suffer from knowledge of his father's lack both when the father figure fails to attain the ideal envisaged *and* when the son is inevitably struck by the reality that there no ideal to identify with exists at all.

1.11. Superego Blues: Anomie, Narcissism and Incels

The decline of institutionalized authority and transition into an ostensibly 'permissive society' does not lead to the "decline in the superego" but rather, it supplants the parental superego with a harsh, punitive superego that, in the absence of social prohibitions derives most of its "psychic energy" from the destructive, aggressive impulses within the id" (Lasch, 1979, p. 40). This new superego of compulsory enjoyment demands submission to the rules of social intercourse but refuses to ground those rules in a transcendent moral code which as Lasch sees it, encourages "self-absorption" (*ibid*., p. 41). The 'self' that emerges in these conditions is one that suffers from a chronic state of anxiety, depression, grandiosity, infantilism and inner emptiness (characteristics of narcissism) (*ibid*., p. 42). All of this occurs while "health" (mental and physical) is hailed as the modern equivalent to salvation (*ibid*., p. 42).

Without symbolic structures through which one can determine his 'place in the world', politics becomes a way to establish an identity – typically these politics are animated by resentment. The disappearance of the father *imago* and the resentment politics that follow can be read through many present-day cultural phenomena. For example, the resentment that energizes the 'incel' (involuntarily celibate) community is undoubtedly related to the gap between aspirational representations (installed by the culture industry) and reality. Incels claim they are unable to find intimate partnership and rely on misanthropic, racist and misogynist explanations as for why that might be. Often, their unfortunate situation is blamed on the catch-all phrase 'western degeneracy.' In the incel mythos the distribution of sexual partners has been ruthlessly stratified – 'Chads' and 'Staceys', caricatures of 'good-looking', extraverted, successful men and women, have monopolized the dating pool, and a growing pool of men are left without intimate possibilities. Incels identify an inequality in the distribution of female sexual partners and, indirectly relate this inequality to its economic roots. However, since it is at the level of the imaginary where antagonisms become visible, their critique is almost always conceived of through cultural terms – blaming 'cultural marxism' or 'feminism', 'Hollywood' etc. And yet, access to capital does to some extent afford status which *can* lead to more sexual opportunities which members of the incel subculture are acutely aware of in the fact of their identity as downwardly mobile white North American men.[7] Additionally, the ubiquity of online pornography has undoubtedly altered the structure of expectations (of physical beauty, of intimate relationships) and women who might also identify themselves as 'involuntarily celibate' do not register as sexual prospects for incel men because they have been culturally conditioned to desire 'Staceys.' Without conventional good looks or monetary success, incel men are left in a trap, desiring a love-object from the imaginary of culture but stranded without a symbolic identity through which they can acquire the confidence and prestige to attract her. Under a cultural paradigm steeped in the "rhetoric of achievement" resentment accumulates because it is "only as personified capital that the capitalist is respectable" (Lasch, 1979, p. 119; Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, p. 254).

---

[7] *Violent Misogyny Found in 'incel' is a Form of Terrorism.* CBC Radio: The Current. April 26, 2018. Link: http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-april-26-2018-1.4636157/violent-misogyny-found-in-incel-is-a-form-of-terrorism-says-author-1.4636164

"Men shouldn't have to look and act like big, animalistic beasts to get women. The fact that women still prioritize brute strength just shows that their minds haven't fully evolved", wrote Elliot Rodger, the 22-year-old man who killed six people and injured fourteen at the University of California, Santa Barbara in May 2014.[8] Rodger became a saint for the incel community and his declarations have since become canon. There is of course, a racialized dimension to this declaration and its subsequent mimicry on the alt-right. The language of virility is spiked with ambivalence – men "shouldn't have to" resemble beasts of virility to acquire sex. But what image of virility does this adopt? In *'Black Skin White Masks',* Frantz Fanon discusses the roots of racial hatred through an analysis of *jouissance* of the other. The term 'cuck' widely circulates in and beyond the discourse of incels and the attendant alt-right. To be a 'cuck' signifies the refusal of the white man to stand up to a black man who has stolen his love object. To be 'cucked' refers to this dynamic wherein the impotent 'beta' male resigns to his inferior social status in the presence of an 'alpha' male of potency. Through the adoption of this term, and the discourse of Elliot Rodger, a politics of alienation and resentment takes on racialized significance as the envy of the jouissance of the other motivates racist caricatures and encourages a collective disavowal of responsibility toward declining status and increased isolation. Socialized to seek error in the sexual economy rather than in their own behaviour, the incel community resigns itself, following Rodger's lead, to engage in the fatalism of death drive politics.

Without egoic recognition, socialized belonging, meaningful engagements with the world and a viable future, the erotic or 'life instincts' are completely overrun by the death drive. Once the death instinct is no longer in service to eros, annihilation (of the self, of existence) is all that can manifest. American sociologist, Robert K. Merton saw that the disequilibrium between "culturally prescribed goals and socially structured avenues for attaining these aspiration" results in "aberrant behavior" (2017, p. 183). Christopher Lasch saw, in 1979, that "the modern propaganda of commodities and the good life has sanctioned impulse gratification and made it unnecessary for the id to apologize for its wishes or

---

[8] This is a quote from one of Rodger's posts on Bodybuilding.com's "miscellaneous" section. Rodger is heralded as the 'the supreme gentlemen' by incel posters on 4chan, inspiring the "Beta Uprising.".
Source: *The New Man of 4Chan.* Angela Nagle. The Baffler. March 2016. Link:
https://thebaffler.com/salvos/new-man-4chan-nagle

disguise its grandiose proportions" (p. 56). He continues, "But this same propaganda has made failure and loss unsupportable...a shattering blow to the sense of selfhood" (*ibid*., p. 56). Now the ego must continuously apologize to not only the id for its inability to satiate instinctual appetites, but the neoliberal superego with its injunction to 'consume', 'enjoy' and be 'successful' Resentment breeds when potential and growth have been suppressed. Life has an inner dynamism based in potential. If this potential is thwarted the energy typically directed toward life is channeled into destruction (Fromm, 1965). A discussion of "anomie – what Durkheim saw as an apathetic state wherein reality seems valueless by comparison to dreams and imagination – might be relevant here (Lemert, 2017, p. 70).

Anomie, defined by Durkheim as an 'insatiable will' stemming from life in a society that fails to prescribe consistent and meaningful systems of moral instruction, is what we might today associate with 'the crisis of mental health' (1 in 6 Americans are currently on some form of psychiatric medication[9]) (*ibid*., p. 70). Anomie is a response to the altered relationship between hope and reality in the face of deterritorializing technocratic rationality (*ibid*., p. 70). A sense of futility, weariness and disillusionment takes its political form in resentment. What has been sold in the realm of the imaginary, for incels cannot be actualized in the Real conditions of his life. This discrepancy – in love, work and life prospects – between image and reality is accentuated by the expanding gap in space. Like the boy who no longer sees his father participate in craftsmanship where the things he makes retain an aspect of his father's personality due to the space opened up by the industrial/bureaucratic, work/life separation, the incel (as an ideal type) is psychically disassociated from the material world – occupying virtual space and increasingly dissatisfied with the Real that he dejectedly encounters. In this way, incels are psychically aligned with the image that Mitscherlich paints of the 'forgotten man': an asocial type who experiences inhibition (complaints of awkwardness, feelings of dissociation from the body, self-consciousness, the 'irony bro' phenomena), loss of concentration (ADHD diagnoses are up 42% from 2003-2011 in the U.S.[10]), loss of contact with physical things, indifference to others and destructiveness (1969, p. 163). These are not defects in character but rather

---

[9] Scientific American: '1 in 6 Americans Take a Psychiatric Drug. Retrieved from: https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/1-in-6-americans-takes-a-psychiatric-drug/

[10] Visser et al., Trends in the Parent-Report of Health Care Provider-Diagnosed and Medicated Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: United States, 2003–2011. JAACAP 2014;53:34-46

evidence that the process of alienation involves a devastating decline in libidinal object ties to the environment, a loss of reality and contributes to growing and atmospheric resentment (*ibid*., p. 163).

The crisis of masculinity is, in part, materially produced by the gap between expectations and reality. Bureaucracy and social media form an "intricate network of personal relations" which puts a premium on social capital which fosters an unbridled sense of egoism as a mode of survival (Lasch, 1979, p. 40). The 'alt-right' recognize this shift to social capital and resent its failure to include avenues for personal success that do not rely upon physical attractiveness, yearly income or any other mode of signaling 'worth' through commodification. The "grandiose, narcissistic, infantile, and empty self" that predominates under individualist consumer capitalism is weak in structure and precarious in time. As downward economic mobility and precarious egos become more entangled and reactive only an apocalyptic imagination can survive. Meritocratic ideology consistently impressed upon children that their parents desired and *expected* that they would live a "better life" than them but in reality, since the 1970's relative wages have failed to increase with inflation and children of the baby boomer generation are downwardly mobile in comparison to the access to wealth their parents enjoyed.[11] This material discrepancy between expectations and reality translates into symbolic differences as well.

Despite being abstract and impersonal, "money", writes Merton, "is peculiarly well adapted to become a symbol of prestige" (Lemert, 2017, p. 184). The deterritorialization of money and of the worker eventually decodes social scripts and leaves nothing but the rationalized asymmetrical distribution of capital to structure who an individual is, what is afforded to him in terms of experience and how his desire gets exercised according to his (class) share of the abstract flow of capital (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972). In light of this, the flight to the virtual (fantasy), can be understood as a 'rational' irrational response to the depressing real circumstances of one's life. See:

---

[11] From 1973 to 2013, hourly compensation of a typical (production/nonsupervisory) worker rose just 9 percent while productivity increased 74 percent. Source: *Economic Policy Institute*. January 2015. Link: https://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/

"D&D" refers to Dungeons and Dragons, a massively popular multiplayer role-playing game.

Tweet courtesy of @whimsicaldumpin

1.12. The Entropy of Epistemic Certainty and Its Echo

What we crave is a position of status qua symbolic order. To do this, uninterrogated master signifiers must be mobilized and protected as sacred. But to denaturalize meaning is to demonstrate how it results from a series of contingent encounters (Žižek, 1991, p. 39). The history of desire as a history of contingency compromises the individual's relation to status as it is unveiled as a production. Deterritorialization is the process of unveiling or demystifying the aspects of existence that sustained an element of mystery or profundity in premodern and modern societies. We can think of the collapse of the big Other occurring in three steps, in the three narcissistic injuries to human-centric ontologies. Freud himself recognized these consecutive insults to human narcissism in the Copernican revolution's decentering of the universe, Darwin's decentralization of life in evolutionary biology and finally in the decentering of thinking in his theory of the unconscious (Tomsic, 2015, p. 86). With these three de-totalizing shifts, the modern scientific paradigm deprives humanity of its center and exposes them to their "contingency and instability", which is experienced as a kind of "foreclosure of meaning" (*ibid.*, p. 87). In conjunction with the ascendance of market relations, the subject of the modern scientific paradigm is abandoned to navigate transactional relationships in an increasingly technomic world.

Levelling out the social field to exchange relations forces the individual to confront the bare, abstract and alienating reality of his status in life as officially, inescapably

26

dependent upon calculative structures of value. To return to Lacanian terminology, the collapse of the big Other is experienced as an ongoing process of de-symbolization. When the symbolic is abandoned, experience is reduced to mere symptom: nonsensical, recurring, unanalyzed 'having' without the experience of being (Lacan, 1975). This absence exposes both the conscious and unconscious mind to an overwhelming, indigestible sense of chaos (of the Real), paired with a banal but persistent nausea at the exhaustive repetition of cultural productions whose aim is to absorb the "decoding flows" that are now available without the prohibitions of symbolic law. The fracture of moral codes and sudden presence and visibility of epistemic plurality (experienced as moral/epistemic relativism) now animates political and social fields, which can and does erode the possibility of any implied singularity necessary for a conception of universal law (such as 'human rights'). This fractures social and therefore political solidarity by transforming the other into a less trustworthy (or even relevant) figure. Žižek claims that the "suspension of the master signifier", whose function is to stabilize meaning and "knit together the chain of signifiers", is an "unbearable, suffocating closure", one that announces itself in the sense of powerlessness and aloneness it inflicts (Dean, 2017, p. 3; Žižek, 1991, p. 150-153). Confronted with the "loss of binding power or performative efficacy of words", the subject may be more inclined to cling to fatalistic platitudes, blame human nature for atrocities (bad faith) and seek refuge from guilt, anxiety and isolation in consumerism, authoritarianism, nihilism or any combination of these three (Dean, 2017, p. 3).

The epistemic entropy constitutive of symbolic decline is a function of the ontological insecurity it generates. Following Žižek, Jodi Dean explains that the decline of symbolic efficiency "designates the fundamental uncertainty accompanying the impossibility of totalization" (2016, p. 3). What astrology, sports, health (diet) lifestyles/regimens or conspiracy theories have in common is that their popularity is derived from the psychic totalization they accommodate.[12] The less able we are to access historical or metaphysical totalities of meaning, the more creative we become in

---

[12] We can read the 'flight into mysticism' – new obsessions with the occult and astrology as a symptom of declining symbolic efficiency. "Stella Bugbee, the president and editor-in-chief of *The Cut*, says a typical horoscope post on the site got 150 percent more traffic in 2017 than the year before." Source: The Atlantic "Why Are Millenials So Into Astrology?" Link: https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/01/the-new-age-of-astrology/550034/

resurrecting micro-totalities as metanarratives to our otherwise seemingly arbitrary and chaotic lives. The possibility for adequation is undermined by a general inability to extract particular truths from a consistent and reliable schema of universal values – a stable criteria through which we might generate answers and assess their validity – has been foreclosed (Dean, 2016, p. 3). Human subjectivity under these conditions is faced with profound uncertainty concerning *what is*, infinite doubt concerning who one might be and ultimate reflexivization when considering one's relation with others (and the world). These doubts, Dean suggests, necessitate an encounter with three threats: a threat to language, to fantasy, and to meaning – ultimately, a threat to desire itself (*ibid*., 4). Without coherent, stable and socially acknowledged symbolic referents there can be no closure to questions like *'Who am I?' 'What do I want?' 'What does this mean?'* etc. Together, these threats describe the *ontological insecurity* produced by the decline of symbolic efficiency and hint at the social and egoic precarity at the heart of its manifestation (Giddens, 1991; Laing, 1960).[13] The ground on which experience must find its orientation to meaning is effectively swept away and what's left is a repetitive series of ephemeral, absurd and meaningless intensities. Because of this, the social fabric and structure of identity is also destabilized. In the wake of modernity, atomization and the erosion of institutions take the subjective tune of "directionless whizzing" where "life loses all rhythm" and stable personal identities are abandoned for their lack of flexibility (Han, 2017, p. 33). One is forced to sustain a personal brand (read: identity) to function adequately in the world while sifting through a seemingly infinite number of imaginary systems to hitch one's identity to. There are, as Byung-Chul Han points out, "no stable social rhythms or cycles to unburden the individual's temporal economy" (*ibid*., p. 32).

---

[13] Existential anti-psychiatry theorist and practitioner R.D. Laing coins the term 'ontological insecurity' to discuss the experience of schizophrenic patients who oscillate between inhabiting hat he deems a 'self' and a 'false self system'. While his use of the term speaks most directly to the psychic fragmentation of a person experiencing schizophrenia, his description of a persistent 'fear of loss of identity and autonomy' in the face of reifying and uncertain material and social relations does resemble the subjective conditions of neoliberal capitalism I am attempting to highlight here (1960, p. 44). The loss of symbolic coordinates for one's life invites, while perhaps not psychotic, as in the case of Laing's case studies, a profound sense of ontological confusion and produces a sense of metaphysical and social abandonment. My use of the term ontological insecurity is not entirely in line with Laing's use, but, in accepting Deleuze and Guattari's work on capitalism and schizophrenia, I am adopting the anti-psychiatry materialist perspective that sees the material conditions of economic precarity and directly participating in the production of ontological disturbances and fracturing that involve a significant psychic and therefore social fragmentation.

Now that the "fixity" of symbolic identities is transcended, the precarity of imaginary identities takes hold. Dean describes the decline of symbolic efficiency as "accompanied by the convergence between the imaginary and the Real" wherein imaginary identities replace symbolic identities and are sustained purely by virtue of their "promise and provision of enjoyment" (2010, p. 57). Imaginary identities weaken one's reliance on the prohibitions/permissions of a symbolic superego, offering "freedom from rigid norms and expectations", a newfound fluidity but also a new force of "fragility and insecurity" (*ibid.*, p. 57). Postmodern denarrativization or the death of the symbolic seizes and disarms one's ability to produce a narrative synthesis for their life, which is also an incapacity for temporal synthesis, which ultimately sets off a crisis of identity (Han, 2017, p. 27). Without the dialectical tension proper to symbolic narratives, the individual struggles to find a rhythm of life capable of generating thresholds of meaning and transitions that inspire identity. Insecure egos cannot be an authority on the structure of their own desire, meaning and performativity, they cannot access the so-called freedom initiated by the decline of symbolic efficiency, thus, the deterritorialized subject escapes his freedom by seeking refuge in the substitute symbolic structures of neurosis (neurosis as a private religion), religion, or ideology (Brown, 1959, p. 147, Fromm, 1965).

Dean's reading of Žižek determines that the function of the paternal signifier is in decline as a result of "universalized reflexivity", and that increasing levels of self-consciousness on behalf of cultural subjectivity reaches its limit as the veil of belief is rent through the revelation of scientific and historical contingencies (2010, p. 5). Here, it is the possibility of adequation and credibility that is at stake in the decline of symbolic efficiency (*ibid.*, p. 5). Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, announcements on behalf of journalists and media theorists of a nascent "post-truth" era of politics resonated with the public imaginary. Post-truth or 'post-reality' politics are a product of epistemic plurality. Without a singular master signifier knitting together chains of significations, 'truth' in the socius is dislodged from its privileged status *as* master signifier and instead, operates as a function of the varied, incommensurate master signifiers established by ideological orientations. Nietzsche depicted these conditions early on, introducing the notion of perspectivism to describe the perceptual chaos endemic to fundamentally unstable signifiers of truth (1884). But the collision of 'truths' becomes increasingly difficult to

ignore in societies that spend a vast majority of their time immersed in the imaginary webs of meaning available online. The cognitive dissonance associated with hyperconsumption of content tends to envelop and overwhelm the individual – faced with an endless stream of information and without an epistemic anchor to organize its meaning, one is confronted with a swarm of contradictory narratives. These conflicting narratives invite and encourage the consumer to rapidly shift identities so comfortably sink into its particular mode of sense-making. Thus, retreat into ideological organizations of meaning becomes more and more attractive and necessary so that a sense-making apparatus is prepared and deployed on a consistent basis. Depending on the sense-making apparatus (i.e. ideology) one subscribes to, (reflected by personalized media algorithms) Donald Trump is either 'colluding with the Russians' or fighting an internal civil war against the 'deep state' to end child sex-trafficking and oppose the ever-nefarious 'globalists'.

'Post-truth' politics are profoundly postmodern and signal a kind of collective psychosis – the loss of reality on a mass scale. Lacan's analysis of psychosis describes the absence of symbolic mediation between the imaginary and the Real (*ibid.*, p. 5). Inundated by images around the clock, if not completely submerged in the realm of the imaginary, digital subjects are faced with a loss of meaning while navigating extremely dense networks that attempt to simulate it. Media scholar Jayson Harsin has identified the structure of the attention economy (information overload and acceleration) and the use of cognitive science to influence political communication through perception management in a fragmented media environment as developments contributing to our entrance into a "regime of post-truth" (Harsin, 2015). Today, it is "images and affects" which flow into the gaps left by the declining symbolic", writes Dean, leaving the "virtual space of symbolic fiction" in a state of continuous non-desire and non-meaning (2010, p. 5; 2017, p. 5). Yet these images are inscribed with a semblance of symbolic meaning – always tied somehow to fragments of master signifiers from the past (for example, nostalgia in advertisements) but remain tinged with a sense of unreality, uncanny artificiality and suggest a kind of mass subjective destitution. In 2017 the average American was exposed

to 10,000 "brand messages" a day[14], most of which draw from the symbolic referents of a more "meaningful" (read: novel), less "reflexive" (read: self-conscious) era.

Žižek writes that the "Real that serves as support for our symbolic reality must appear to be found, and not produced" (1991, p. 32). That we must gaze backwards to gain access to the symbolic universe is a one of the reasons a culture experiencing the decline of symbolic efficiency suffers from acute nostalgia, idealizing and compulsively reproducing its previous iterations in hopes of attaining some symbolic currency.[15] Deleuze and Guattari write that the "fascist State has been without a doubt capitalism's most fantastic attempt at economic and political reterritorialization," asserting that archaism – reintroducing old code fragments – "nourishes modern fascism" (1972, 258). Canadian psychologist and conservative media personality Jordan Peterson's call to his followers for a symbolic resuscitation in the form of restoring 'Western values' (white, liberal bourgeois morality) involves reverence for Western mythology and colonial history and patriarchal cultural norms. His call lands on eager ears; a return to the past stands seductive to those witnessing the future close in on them. Peterson uses so-called 'natural' hierarchies (of "dominance") as a semantic device of power to draw those without power toward seemingly stable orders within which they can regain access to the status their ego-ideal so desperately craves and thinks it deserves. The political implications of this kind of nostalgia for symbolic identities, both cultural and personal, will be elaborated in the fourth chapter.

The loss of singular, unifying ideals, social binding agents like theological or political ideals calls forth a tension between two incommensurate coping mechanisms: the reactionary desire to return to previous, often totalitarian, structures of society and the escapist or progressive pursuit of substitute symbolic systems with new modes of relation as their raison d'etre. In his paper delivered at the Rome Congress in 1953, Jacques Lacan invites students to consider that "symbolic discordances" may be "characteristic of the complex structures of civilization", and that they "consign the subject to a sense of breakdown produced by "symbolic conflicts" and "imaginary fixations" (2002, p. 68). This

---

[14] *Why Your Customer's Attention is the Scarcest Resource in 2017*. Joshua Saxon. American Marketing Association. Source: https://www.ama.org/partners/content/Pages/why-your-customers-attention-scarcest-resrouces-2017.aspx

[15] This idea will be developed more thoroughly in the fourth chapter in a discussion of politics.

breakdown is experienced as an intersubjective block – a tension that develops as the path through which "desire gains recognition" is obstructed (*ibid*., p. 68). While we undoubtedly suffer from "imaginary fixations" with cell-phone addiction[16] and 'gaming disorder'[17] now diagnosable psychiatric conditions, the "symbolic conflicts" Lacan describes deserve some elucidation.

1.13. What Denarrativization Invites

French postmodern theorist, Jean-Francois Lyotard described the postmodern condition as a consequence of the fracture of a grand narrative (Lemert: 2016, 355). The narrative chain yields meaning by making a selection – narrative consists in excluding the presence of random material to build a system of meaning and choosing a direction (flow) of attention (Han, 2017, p. 51). Denarrativization is a process where perception begins to hover and meaning is suspended as the pathways that regulate the sequence of events are dissolved (*ibid*., p. 51). With the collapse of a grand narrative, various speculative narratives emerge to fill its place. These speculative visions are projected and consumed primarily, I would argue, on the internet. The vacuum of meaning consequent upon deterritorialization attracts reterritorializations which can be psychotic, paranoiac, and obsessional in structure and digital social networks are the perfect space for speculation to circulate and garner recognition. Lyotard describes the process of denarrativization as a collision of languages in the absence of a universal metalanguage. We might describe these collisions as symbolic collision – suggesting the sense that one is unable to speak the same language and communicate effectively and meaningfully with the other, that all referents are irreducibly opposed and all beliefs, fundamentally incommensurate. This absence of a center in the symbolic web gains visibility in the hyperconnectedness distinctive of an information society because unconscious psychic tensions, and endless chaotic and fragmented desires for certainty are projected onto screens, populating cybernetic fields of communication and representation. "Desire", write Deleuze and Guattari, "devotes itself perfectly to reactionary unconscious investments" (1972, 257). Digital fields become, in a

---

[16] Source: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5076301/

[17] Source: http://www.who.int/features/qa/gaming-disorder/en/

deterritorialized material reality, expressive channels of doubt, hostility, desire and other residual repressed contents of the unconscious. Social networks absorb psychic antagonisms and turn a profit out of them, but nonetheless, remain sites of reterritorialization.

It is in the realm of the virtual, minus superegoic mediation and censorship, that the gaps in the symbolic are filled in (Dean, 2010, p. 9). The Lacanian symbolic is intrinsically entangled with unconscious desires and the discourse of the other, and the internet, accordingly to Clint Burnham, can be considered our "outsourced unconscious or memory" – a space we enter, a timeless web through which we navigate our desire (2018, p. 17). Contingent desires manifest algorithmically, forming the virtual reterritorializations consequent of desiring-production (*ibid.*, p. 46). Algorithmic virtual webs are experienced as a constant collision of individual and collective fantasies, ephemeral events and the generative circulation of *objet petit a*. Burnham affirms that "subjectivity emerges in relation to the Event" – that one is always constituted as a subject in the terms of their fidelity to the truth of the Event (*ibid.*, p. 56). The Event, according to Žižek is that which reframes our perception by introducing a new master signifier. So, the question becomes: what is the master signifier introduced by an Event like social media? Is it novelty, obscenity, virality, immediacy, 'connection', sexuality, anonymity, identity, enjoyment? One might argue any of these carefully and effectively but miss the paradoxical nature of social media as Event: the Event of social media is precisely the moment when perception is introduced to a fundamentally ambiguous discourse of the other, a discourse *without* a stabilizing master signifier, a space dominated by the enigmatic gaze of the other (the big Other?), a gaze whose desire is animated by a schizoid, accelerated shifting of meaning, unhinged from any master (grand) narrative (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, p. 34).

Constructing symbolic worlds and generating and installing adherence to a new master signifier is always an interpretative act of giving significance. There is, no doubt, a creative dimension to this process which involves wish-fulfilments assembled through an interaction between memory and fantasy. But symbolization, Dean reminds us, is always intersubjective, "given to and impressed upon the subject in and through language" just as Adorno claims that "freedom to choose an ideology always reflects economic coercion" (2017, p. 7; 1944, p. 136). The relation between material conditions and desiring-

production is inseparable, the fantasies that animate digital fields are configured materially but today manage to gain visibility in the virtual. Demands for (worker) flexibility, and the precarity it engenders exerts its influence on the shape of desire. Mark Fisher summarizes this point brilliantly in stating that "as production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems" in his discussion of precarious work in post-Fordist capitalism (2009, p. 34). Today, the average worker will find themselves employed in a series of short-term jobs, unable to plan for the future, and continuously performing emotional labour so intense it borders on an injunction to mania at alienating jobs that offer little to no stability or duration. Work, now nearly inseparable from "life" infiltrates one's dreams, it seizes one's subjective experience of time and transforms it into "chaotic, broken, punctiform divisions" (*ibid*., p. 35). Suddenly, one's inner life begins to mirror the manic/depressive boom/busts of the market. Combined with the individualization of 'mental illness'[18] (foreclosure of 'structural causes' as an explanatory element), it is no wonder that the unconscious fantasies of the neoliberal subject involve totalization (read: totalitarianism), womb-like security (i.e. safe-spaces, delayed adulthood), paranoiac feelings of a 'mysterious' oppressive force (i.e. conspiracy theories), Oedipal infantilization and heroic mythopoetic scripts (i.e. QAnon, Jordan Peterson).[19]

---

[18] The foreclosure of a structural causation of mental illness is directly influenced by the individualized model undertaken since the time that it began to be understood. The so-called "broken-brain" model replaced earlier cultural theories rooted in supernaturalism, but at the expense of the socially relevant factors that contributed to depression, anxiety, acute shyness, and so on. While there is no doubt that some mental disturbances are highly individualistic insofar as they have a powerful genetic component, the mode of classification and diagnostic model of psychiatry, perhaps in reaction the the pseudo-mystical cultural theories that preceded it, has disavowed socio-structural causation since it began.

[19] What many of these substitute satisfactions share is enacted attempts to appropriate the fragments of a symbolic narrative and reassemble these fragments according to a structural logic which, though flawed in so many ways, is consistent with the organizing principles of traditional religious logics.

1.14. Digital Reterritorialization

The negation of pronounced material precarity can be observed online in the many attempts at psychic totalization. The (ontological) gaps must be filled, and there are more gaps than ever. And yet, taking refuge in the virtual does not protect from the anxiety inherent in relations with the other. In fact, when we are online, navigating "multiple interlinked media", we are never sure to what we have made ourselves invisible, for whose gaze we are performing, for what purposes our images will be consumed and appropriated (Dean, 2017, p. 12). And yet, we prosume (produce and consume) content at all hours, we confess, we "like", we "share", we "link" etc. In a society cleansed of spontaneous, (decommodified) sensuous expression, the virtual becomes a playful apparatus for our innermost desires (erotic and destructive) – it is the return of the repressed.

Dialectically speaking, however, repression in the material world and expression in the virtual does not simply ignite a casual chain. The substance of the virtual, what goes in, always spills out, it overflows into the material again and the feedback loop repeats ad infinitum. What is most interesting about this process is the way in which virtual relations translate back into social codes in the non-virtual, actuality of human relationships – political, intimate, cultural etc. Perhaps the 'decoded flows' that stimulate virtual discourse are re-coded as they pass through digital networks – Tumblr morality and alt-right socio-linguistic categories seem to demonstrate this effect. These dynamics suggest a kind of traversal of imaginary fields in order for groups to generate new symbolic meanings.

Deleuze and Guattari submit that fantasy is never individual, that it is always *group fantasy* and that "desire is problem of groups and for groups" (1972, p. 30). The amassing swarm of digital images – images that act as a substance, receptacle and vehicle for social reality – is hypnotic, not just for individuals, but for groups, and the addictive property is not found in one individual's relationship to the image, but always in a social, often phantasmagoric desiring-production that is by definition, social. The structure of virality – social capital as reward for repressive, desublimated content production has signaled something interesting about how imaginary terrain is traversed and how symbolic referents circulate in virtual space. The imaginary, that is, the virtual, becomes the space where symbolic terrain is contested, negotiated and reconciled. The shape that these contestations

take and the psychosocial consequences they manifest will become central to the discussion developed in chapter two.

Chapter 2.   Libidinal Diversions: Attention, Individuation and the Death Drive

The sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.
    Walter Benjamin, 1936, p. 13

The field in which the psychic dynamics of symbolic collapse are most visible is that of digital social relations. It is here that the gaps in the symbolic are felt, articulated and filled in by what Jodi Dean calls 'psychotic discourses' (2009). A close analysis of a particular discourse that resembles this structure, that of the alt-right, will be developed in chapter four. This chapter will illustrate the mechanisms through which deterritorialization is carried out, with particular attention paid to the short-circuiting mechanisms operative in digital space. It will also discuss the ways in which networked communications have become the privileged site of reterritorialization. First, however, a discussion of attentional capture, the death drive and the libidinal economy of the internet will demonstrate the affective, cultural, economic and social disaster rooted in the advancement of psychotechnical capture, arguing that the more attention dwindles, the more social *linkages* are weakened, engendering a kind of "generalized insecurity" and "immense doubt about the future" – the kind alluded to in chapter one (*ibid*., p. 58).

2.1.   The Debtor-Addict as a Site of Resource Extraction

In 1950, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson recognized that the dynamism defining American culture subjects its inhabitants to "abrupt changes during a lifetime", oscillating between polarities of tradition and immigration, internationalism and isolationism, competition and cooperation (1950, p. 260). Erikson saw this Western subject as an heir of extreme contrasts, faced with the task of ego-formulation through navigation of these polarities (*ibid*., p. 261). He cautioned that the complicated and perpetually ambiguous tenor of this fluctuation may "expose [America's] youth to an emotional and political short circuit" (*ibid*., p. 261).

The psychic consequences of a declining symbolic order and the associated 'spectacle consciousness' that organizes everyday life reverberate in all intersubjective relations, in one's experience of time and in one's experience of the self as an autonomous force in the world. These consequences carry relevant political and social implications in an age where perceptual chaos defines contemporary electoral politics and a crisis of "mental health" bears down on populations forced to bear the brunt of the precarity inherent to neoliberal rationality and governance (Brown, 2015). We resemble, in these conditions, Mark Fisher's "debtor-addict" subject – a figure of what he and others describe as the normative subject position of those inhabiting "control societies" – someone easily manipulated for profit and interpellated as a perpetual consumer whose needs, spiritual and relational, are always "economized" and reduced to profit-inducing maladjustments (Brown, 2015). The "debtor-addict" subject is rendered politically impotent for he seldom, in the flux of everyday images, bears witness to the historical proceedings that led him to his particular subject position and thus, rarely glimpses into the imaginative potential latent in alternate ways of organizing production that would lead populations out of the ontologized neoliberal order that disarms them.[20] Without historically informed symbolic incitements to challenge the structural precarity installed in the material and psychic fabric of a population there can be little more than inconvenient discontent – hushed and impotent complaints – circulating in the social field. It takes a genuine, concentrated and sustained effort to trace the roots of neoliberal ideology and generate an understanding for the structural abjection imparted by its success in the West. As symbolic consciousness declines so does historical consciousness and with it goes the will to question and subvert

---

[20] This is a general trend in technomic cultures at large, however, in recent years (even months) the rise of left populism, which can be observed in massive support for figures like Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, Bernie Sanders in the U.S., the popularity of Podemos in Spain, and the mass labour protests in India in early 2019 and ongoing protests against Macron's austerity policies in France, signals a breaking point. At large, the Western subject of liberal democracy and the libidinal economy of technological consumerism is still, to a large extent, potentiated through exhaustion, whether it be exhaustion of attentional resources, physical exhaustion through working multiple jobs or both. The debtor-addict subject is, for the purposes of this chapter, understood as a subject continuously mined for libidinal resources, and bound, under a system of debt, to short-term planning – a precarious subject who more or less disaffected and views political movements with apathy and/or cynicism. This cynicism is not entirely depotentiated though. Networked communications are pharmakological: both poison and cure – ironic distance can produce a playful find of solidarity through shared disenfranchisement, as seen in the rising popularity of anti-capitalist memes and the discourse surrounding them.

the all-consuming business ontology that economizes non-economic spheres of life and subordinates people and states to the regime of growing profit (Brown, 2015, p. 31).

When faced with a crisis, capitalism breaches boundaries, extending appropriative efforts toward the capture of new resources – new fodder for the machine. Natural resources, like water, care and now, attention, have become new targets for expropriation of profit. Mining attention, which, in a deterritorialized and increasingly virtual social world, is more available, active and excitable than ever, has become the central model for expanding profits in a world dominated by brands, 'influencers' and targeted advertising. The externalities, like those associated with symbolic appropriation, are generally undertaken by the producers – it is individuals who feel the symbolic fabric of their life slip away, their attention mined and who suffer psychosocial havoc in the forms of intensified precarity and misery in the dissolution of cultural bonds. Minus symbolic meaning and focused attention, one tends to suffer from heightened levels of stress and anxiety, depression, fatigue, loneliness, dissociation and to adopt a general disaffected disposition which is both isolating and thoroughly dispersed throughout the socius. It is impossible to ignore waning attention, the notion is frequently but interpassively observed, and yet, the possibility of going back to a time when the question of attention did not exist is also impossible.[21]

As one's attention is fragmented at ever-increasing rates, there can be little or no concerted effort to subvert the mechanisms of a control society. Once 'slogan-recognition' has become sufficient to navigate the informational plane the state of knowledge and understanding – virtues necessary in consolidating an effective and disruptive political consciousness – is surely under threat (*ibid.*, p. 25). Humans *qua* withering attention-spans are conveniently pacified in the face of brutal austerity. The attention economy has brilliantly quelled revolutionary libidinal charges and harnessed the energetic resources of consciousness to fuel the nihilistic hedonia of late stage capitalism.

---

[21] Of course, this is not to condemn the use of networked communications, but only to point out that, under the capitalist mode of production, the aim of app developments and their investors is to capture attention and sustain its presence for as long as possible. This model, organized by profit accumulation, aims to maximize time spent in-app and therefore seizes attentional resources through exploitative means—manipulations include inducing insecurity through delayed rewards and algorithmic responses to 'mood', designing the presentation of content in the most absorptive manner possible, etc. Digital communications are crucial, but communicative capitalism (Dean) is detrimental to the psychic health of a population.

2.2. "Paying" Attention

Attention exists in the ego, which psychoanalysis deems 'the seat of consciousness' – attention is essentially an attentive flow: the flow of consciousness (Stiegler, 2010, p. 5). This psychic faculty is the "repository of what Husserl calls 'primary retentions' – what occurs in the conscious flow of time" and is the home of perceptions which become memories once they become secondary retentions (*ibid.*, p. 5). Today attention is "hypersolicited", reduced to the function of consumption as the new object of the spectacle-economy (*ibid.*, p. 80, 98). General changes in attention are, like most psychosocial phenomena, produced through the entanglement of environmental and biological forces. Katherine Hayles has analyzed cognitive changes in attention over recent decades and has come to describe a "generational mutation" through which human beings transition from a default state of "deep attention" – sustaining focus on a single object – into a general mode of "hyperattention" where attention oscillates rapidly, floating, taking in a flux of information from multiple sources, always searching for heightened levels of stimulation and displaying a weak tolerance for boredom (2007). Basing her analysis in the science of cerebral plasticity, Hayles posits that synaptic connections in the brain co-evolve with environments, suggesting that the nervous system is continually reconfigured as a function of the environment (2007). Ours is an environment packed from corner to corner with spectacles employed to seduce our attention – a social field experiencing near-total immersion in the imaginary with an economic system just as fixated on the short-term and novel forms of intensity as our image-addicted attention spans. These two patterns go hand-in-hand.

Taking residence in the entertainment matrix, jumping from spectacle to spectacle results in an "inability to synthesize time into any coherent narrative", which suits the aims of finance capital whose reality is organized in terms of return of investment with rapid, sporadic events collapsing the 'flow' of time or any other organic sequence into a series of ephemeral calculations where every day is disconnected from the one that preceded it – the world is up for grabs (Fisher, 2009, p. 24; Brown, 2015)! Mark Fisher sees that

"cyberspatial capital operates by addicting its users", declaring Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder the "pathology of late capitalism" (2009, p. 25). Others have noted their concern with what seems to be a collective disintegration of attention-spans in the face of exploitative, psychically appropriative, economic models. What Fisher refers to as A.D.D., Bernard Stiegler understands as socially produced "cognitive saturation syndrome" which is what Byung-Chul Han refers to as "information fatigue syndrome" (2009; 2014; 2017). All three share in declaring the root of the problem: "psychopolitics".

"Capturing and harnessing libidinal energy is now the basis of capitalism" (Stiegler, 2014, p. 29). Stiegler has regarded the destruction of attention as also involving the destruction of "long-circuits of reason" which he sees as the basis of *reflective* consciousness. Fragmented attention yields short-circuits of reason, i.e. reactionary forms of decision (2010, p. 54). The short-circuiting of attention and therefore reason deprives entire generations of the opportunity to conceive of, project and plan for the future and dissolves the ability of a populus to critically contemplate phenomena and *care about or consider history as a long-circuit of contingent human relations* (*ibid*., p. 55). He links these trends to the cascading process of deterritorialization carried out by the "ultraspeculative organization" of financial capitalism, regarding financialization as a mode of capitalism characterized by its complete disregard for locality and duration by systematically privileging growth in the very short term (*ibid*., p. 55). Ultimately it is consciousness itself, according to Stiegler, that is being destroyed by "industrial psychotechnologies" (*ibid*., p. 55).

Psychotechnologies, instructed by cognitive economics and organized by the logic of capital, are profitable through the process of datamining the contents of unconscious labour. Psychotechnologies negate meaningful reconciliation of the reality and pleasure principles, and spawn collective neurosis like addiction, narcissism and depression, whose symptoms are expressed, digitized and therefore translated into profit. In the year 2000 the average human attention span – the amount of time the mind can remain fixed in contemplation on an object was twelve seconds. A survey of Canadian media consumption by Microsoft concluded in 2016 that the average human's attention span has fallen to eight

seconds, down 4 seconds from the average twelve in 2000.[22] With this news, the human attention span sinks below that of a goldfish, who can focus on an object of thought for ten seconds. In this, our appetite for complexity, along with our capacity to contemplate singularities has withered. Higher and higher doses of smaller, denser, reductive content produce the antidote to complexity: banalization. The world presents itself as simultaneously more and less complex, both hyper-normal, hyper-rational, boring, but also destabilizing, chaotic, uncanny, and overwhelming with the influx of information inherent in a networked society. And how convenient that attention has become more fragmented, scattered, excitable and restless in the precise moment it mutates into capital?

Under conditions of what Jodi Dean calls 'communicative capitalism' the human being, to quote Gilles Deleuze, gets reduced to "measurable units, codes, samples, data, markets or dividuals" (2009; 1992). When attention rises to the status of chief commodity on the market, profiteers of Big Data trade the packages of metadata that our attentional-energy accrues on confessional surveillance apparatuses like Facebook and Instagram that social reality has become so dependent upon. Stiegler affirms this diagnosis, positing that *consciousness is formed as a historical configuration of the id* and that conscious attention, since the end of World War II has been subject to the development of electronic technologies, audiovisual marketing and educational systems, leading to what he calls its "psychotechnical capture" (2010, p. 58). The disintegration of attention is a symptom of the process of deterritorialization. Deterritorialization involves an elimination of experiential thresholds and contemplation of idealities – both being the elemental factors which tend to catalyze transformations on both personal and collective levels.

---

[22] While information like this can certainly startle us, it is worth asking whether or not we *can* still pay attention to a single object for long durations of time, but, in the face of an accelerating pace of life and accumulating demands on our time, adapt and choose to distribute our attention in different ways than previous generations. Perhaps it is more fair to say that we rarely focus our attention for more than eight seconds, but, if necessary, still can. Nonetheless, the social conditions that demand such a profound fragmenting of concentration at the expense of a more contemplative existence should be subject to critique. Information gathered in an article by the New York Times entitled 'The Eight Second Attention Span' (2016). Link: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/22/opinion/the-eight-second-attention-span.html

2.3. Short-Circuiting Consciousness

Stiegler's unease about the intensification of consumption via attentional-capture and man's irresponsibility towards man are not simply the hyperbolic or paranoid rambles of a philosopher concerned with preserving some previous order of relations. Rather, 'big data' does indeed orchestrate the ensemble of images fed to us daily and, as we have seen, the length of attention spans does, to some extent, determine the status of social solidarity.[23] Capturing, storing and selling our attention, data firm Acxiom knows our lives in more intimate detail than the IRS or FBI – storing and advertising its "360-degree customer view" of customer profiles to prospective investors who wish to instrumentalize this data (Han, 2017, p. 27). Acxiom provides access to the information-profiles of nearly three hundred million U.S. citizens – compiling data which becomes extremely useful politically during election campaigns and for the purposes of targeted advertising. Cognitive economics, in conjunction with marketing and information technologies, have succeeded in constructing an inescapable and hugely profitable "economy of attention" (Stiegler, 2010, p. 71). In an information society, as Byung-Chul Han, points out, the state and the market are inseparable[24] – the algorithms employed by Facebook, stock market and secret services are essentially the same (*ibid*., p. 74). But unlike the state or the market whose method of control is allo-exploitative[25], the digital field operates based on auto-exploitative principles; we *want* to spend nearly all our free time exploring digital realms populated by data mining agencies and targeted marketing whether or not our capacity for reflective contemplation is being diminished or not. Han explains that this mechanism of control is far more efficient than the latter due to the underanalyzed feeling of freedom that accompanies the use of networking and communication platforms (*ibid*., p. 73). 'Surfing

---

[23] Of course solidarity, just like attention, has not been completely dissolved. There are still movements on the left and right, mobilized on the basis of economic, personal and political solidarities just as there are still those of us with healthy attention spans who can meditate, read and write books and spend time with loved ones without becoming distracted by our devices.

[24] In a related vein, Wendy Brown discusses in her book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), under neoliberal reason and governance there is a marketization and outsourcing of the state – what Foucault calls "governmentalization" – where politics and business are inseparable with the lexicon of the former displacing the rule of law and political reason. (p. 71)

[25] This can be complicated by the processes of identification operating in ethnonationalist discourse where allo-exploitative dynamics are at play as supporters of a political figure, party, personality etc. identify with the aggressor, sometimes at their own detriment.

the web', having your unconscious mined is experienced as positive freedom – freedom to explore digital fields. But this sense of positive freedom distracts from the lack of *freedom from* surveillance, data collection etc.

Following unconscious desires through the terrain of the digital is hardly an act of free will, but rather, at times, an act of hiding from oneself – distraction as addiction, which, under communicative capitalism, becomes the most profitable trance imaginable. The internet, Clint Burnham points out, is a space we "go to", or "checkout" – arguably the internet is our outsourced memory or unconscious (2018, p. 17). The unconscious is animated by symbols, it is a symbolic consciousness and without external symbolic realities, we retreat inward, chasing symbolic meanings in the virtual *vis a vis* our movements (clicks, likes, links) of desire (*ibid.*, p. 17).

Thus, this so-called freedom in the digital is perhaps an escape from it.[26] The digital medium, being a medium of projection, invites the subject to transform himself into a project. Strategically operating alongside one another, neoliberal market capitalism and the digital age encourage adherence to, and reproduction of a kind of "narcissistic ego-machine' (Han, 2017, p. 48). Here, the autoexploitative isolated 'achievement subject' of neoliberal ideology exists in an enduring 'now-time' where growing, aging, birth and death are all erased (*ibid.*, p. 31). Life spent in digital realms is an effectively denarrativized, desymbolized existence. As the transience endemic to the Real dimension of life is placed 'out of sight' (and therefore out of mind – unprocessed) the more traumatic an encounter with it becomes.

---

[26] It is important to reiterate the instrumental role of the virtual in organizing in movements like the Arab Spring, Occupy and opposition to the Iranian Green Movement. These movements relied on Facebook and other platforms for their efficiency and, in their echo, an entirely new discussion regarding social media and political mobilization opened up. However, these movements took place between 2009-2011 and, while state surveillance still targeted activists and dissidents at this time, there have been significant increases in the level of surveillance, in most technical societies, in this regard. Consolidation of information technologies into more concentrated spaces, China's infamous WeChat – a single platform for all networked communications held under the purview and surveillance of the Chinese state – for example, have placed all dissidents (or citizens in general) in considerable precarity regarding freedom of speech/freedom of association etc. China, in this case, sets a standard here and, just as data firms compete with each other in the context of the tendential fall of the rate of profit, states also compete with each other in terms of the degree of control they subject populations to. If one state becomes authoritarian, ignoring privacy and collecting data to coerce, control and threaten citizens with, others start to fall in line. We have already seen in debates surrounding Bill C 51 in Canada that he rhetoric of 'national security' has become a Trojan horse through which increased state surveillance can be defended and justified. Biopower and now, 'psychopower' on behalf of states has been amplified, extended and carefully fine-tuned in the age of big data.

In addition to this avoidance of consciousness and the care, contemplation and criticality it involves, increasingly digital existence contributes to a heightened sense of self-consciousness. The 'self' is the central node, anonymous or otherwise, in digital fields and the continual encounter with "identification" and "profiles" – condensed (distorted, sanitized, dramatized, perfected) simulacra of the Real person, structures the social with a hyperreal skew. Reality cannot compete and when attention is organized to browse (that is, to objectify) all that comes into its field of vision – the self is not spared from such intense objectification. Christopher Lasch describes self-consciousness as derived from a loss of reality, wherein one is subjected to a punitive superego demanding a perfectly homogeneous performance of the 'self' at every given moment of time (1979). The escalating cycle of self-consciousness initiated by the flight from physical into digital reality "mocks all attempts at spontaneous action or enjoyment" and contributes to man's sense of himself as an object (of control) and to reality as an illusion (Lasch, 1979, p. 165).

Elevated self-consciousness can be understood as a symptom of both declining symbolic efficiency and what several theorists, echoing Erikson, refer to as a kind of 'short-circuiting' of psychosocial feedback loops. The ongoing 'mental health crisis' that continues to divest vast sections of the younger generations of their ability to cope (with inevitable downward mobility, climate catastrophe, apocalyptic politics and symbolic misery) is surely produced in part by a these short-circuits and the lack of *care,* relational and institutional, needed to address such distress. Chronic depression is normalized, acting out is glorified and often rewarded – is madness in our time, asks Karl Jaspers, simply an attempt at sincerity in a time where honest expression and experience are impossible without it (1926)?

2.4. The Death of Desire and the Desire for Death

Feedback loops can be positive or negative. For example, the 'echo chambers' so often referred to in the media analysis that followed the 2016 U.S. presidential election do not allow for negativity to enter the frame. Echo chambers exist as self-purifying positive feedback loops, unchecked by an opposing force (Dean, 2010, p. 15). Feedback loops are

formed by the conjunction of affective intensities and information flow. It is through feedback loops that 'communicative capitalism' as a structure of communications media captures its users in "intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production and surveillance" (*ibid*., p. 4). Jodi Dean explains that just as industrial capitalism operated on the exploitation of labour, communicative capitalism relies on the exploitation of communication (*ibid*., p. 4). Trapping users in an accelerating and addictive, unending montage of images short-circuits the ebb and flow of desire. Moreover, this model of appropriation taps into something special about human desire – that it is sustained on the seduction of *drive*.

Lacanian psychoanalysis differentiates between desire and drive viewing desire as always a desire *to desire*. Desire can never be fulfilled; it searches tirelessly for a sense of jouissance that can never be attained (*ibid*., p. 40). But this is what moves it – the sense of lack and its continual invitation to find objects of desire. Alternatively, drive actually attains jouissance through the repetitive process of never reaching it – drive's failure is its success, it runs in a loop. Thus, the satisfaction of drive is derived from repetition and it is in this way that drive *captures* the subject. Žižek observes that the drive is "always something in which the subject is caught, a kind of acephalous force" (1991, p. 297). The affective texture of being captured in repetitive loops resembles something of an "undead quality", which can be experienced as a type of flatness of or hollowness (Dean, 2010, p. 41). This makes sense because, for Freud, the death instinct manifests as a repetition compulsion in the unconscious – the only compulsion powerful enough to override the pleasure principle (1919, p. 11). For Lacan, the death drive is manifest in every aspect of drive (2002, p. 186). Repetition compulsion is also a response to trauma, namely the original trauma of being severed from the mother – the loss of the world (of pleasure.) Immiseration of the symbolic order can resemble a reiteration of this trauma. Symbolic decline is experienced as the loss of a world (of meaning) and engenders highly profitable repetitions (black holes of libidinal exhaustion like algorithmic timelines or pornography) – amplifications of the logic of drive that coincides with an attention-mining economic model.

The compulsion to mechanically refresh, swipe right and check in dozens of times a day is an example of the death drive at work: a constant, lingering desire for nothingness,

to negate affect: ultimately a desire for sleep. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari denounce the "hypnosis and reign of images" and the "torpor they spread", suggesting also that this reign installs the "universal effusion of the death instinct" (2009, p. 26-29). Conveniently for capital, the death drive can be milked, again and again, it is a limitless current of decoded flows. Dean argues that communicative capitalism thrives not because of unceasing or insatiable desires but in and as the repetitive intensity of drive (Dean, 2019, p. 30). Likewise, as "self-valorizing value" capital thrives on the very trauma that it, in its essence, is. Ultimately, communicative capitalism's affinity for initiating and managing its client's repetition compulsion, beginning with the transition from a consumer paradigm of 'needs' to one consisting in the creation of 'false needs' (installed desires) starts to decompose thresholds of motivation, sublimities and idealities (Marcuse, 1964; Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 28; Stiegler 2014, p. 14). Or, in another way, capitalism binds "schizophrenic charges and energies" (decoded flows or drive-based responses to deterritorialization and exploitation) to a "world axiomatic" that opposes revolutionary potential and redirects all flows to the objects of capital (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 246).

The 'axiomatic' that Deleuze and Guattari describe is a rigorous code that maintains the energy of the flows (libidinal energy) in a bound state on the "body of capital" (*ibid*., p. 245). It comes into being as a dynamic conductor of abstract deterritorialized flows. In destroying the capacity for desire through the short-circuiting of attention, reason and care, capitalism reduces the human energetic system to a container of decoded flows (drives) whose contents are then systematically mined, axiomatized and therefore instrumentalized. Total immersion in a monetized imaginary system where drive-based tendencies reign is not, upon inspection, a suitable environment for what some psychoanalysts call the process of 'individuation'.

2.5. Disindividuation and its Discontents

Conditions of declining symbolic efficiency cast doubt on all forms of sincerity, belief, and desire, which can result in the denarrativization of one's life. Without external realities to cast down meaning from beyond, the individual can do nothing but retreat

inward. Stiegler regards the "liquidation of belief by capitalism" as initiating the "liquidation of desire" as well (2014, p. 12). He argues that the short-term interests of financial capitalism result in psychosocial *disindividuation:* a desubjectivation that generates "disbelief, miscreance, discredit, demotivation and irrationality" – all affecting social forms and psychic experience (*ibid*., p. 12-13). When one forgets how to desire and finds themselves trapped in an infinite loop of drive there is little to no real possibility for subjective growth or *becoming*. With a lack of expressive outlets that go beyond the 'performance principle'[27] (expression in the service of an ego and under the gaze of the superego) we forget how to desire (Stiegler, 2014, p. 43; Lasch, 1979, p. 40).

Capitalist logics of expediency and immediacy do not bode well for the functioning of desire. Desire is desire for desire; it "defers gratification to perpetuate itself as a craving" (Grosz, 1995, p. 256). If we are, at the moment of perceived lack, met with an uncomplicated, immediate gratification in the form of commodity, desire withers from lack of use, its creative potential is diffused. The same goes for imagination. With the establishment of addictive forms of consumption, post-World War II consumer capitalism disperses a calculative logic to all that it absorbs. This calculative logic reduces singularities of desire to standardized particularities ('if you feel *this* way you need *this* product in your life'). These conditions breed an atmosphere of disaffection and lead to a generalized withdrawal from the world and retreat into the self. Here, in alienated isolation, there can be no process of individuation.

Almost prophetically Lasch explains that "a fear of growing up haunts society" while all play, all spontaneity, all self-realization gets subsumed under the "rhetoric of achievement" (1979, p. 47, 125). The pervasive 'rhetoric of achievement' is spun and gains normative status in neoliberal societies. Supplanting the reality principle, 'performance' becomes an end in itself – one must continually *achieve* (measured in quantifiable terms: "likes", assets, net worth, "influence") to articulate one's defense of being and continue as a legitimate subject in the fantasy (ideology) of 'free market' capitalist innovation and growth. But the rhetoric of achievement proves to be one-dimensional – it operates purely at the level of the imaginary, leaving a symbolic lack swelling at the center of being.

---

[27] In *Eros and Civilization* Herbert Marcuse asserts that under industrial capitalism, the reality principle has transformed into the performance principle, resulting in what he calls 'surplus repression'. (1955)

Symbolic meanings do not figure in the achievement paradigm, they are recognized as extraneous to monetizable success and other calculative meanings. For example, knowledge that exceeds the economic scripts for one's life, knowledge that does not directly 'maximize human capital', gets assessed as a 'luxury', if not "a total waste of time." And yet, knowledge is precisely what individuates and transforms the learner. It does this by informing the subject of the history of individual and collective transformations (Stiegler, 2010, p. 184). Without knowledge (which is different from information as it requires negativity), the subject cannot place herself in the flux of contingency and cannot see the transformative potential of an instance – she cannot fantasize about (collective and individual) *becoming*. If it is fantasy that structures desire, then we should be concerned by its standardization via the culture industry.

Just as consumption short-circuits the pathway of desire through immediacy, so does social media short-circuit desire for the Other through overproximity and abolition of remoteness (Han, 2012, p. 13). Overpromixity to the object of desire by way of screens does not, Han points out, produce nearness so much as it abolishes it. (*ibid*., p. 13) In the same way, solitude – what Marcuse deems the "very condition which sustained the individual against and beyond society", has become "technically impossible" (2006, p. 74). Pouring the unconscious into digital fields, constructing an endless web of projection, leaves very little ambiguity in the world – ambiguity being so often the erotic substance of idealization (*ibid*., p. 35). As the historically determined product of desire, the social field suffers an acute flatness when relations are regulated through the manipulation of drive (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, p. 29). This question of desire has relevance in discussions about the decline of 'cultural spaces' (in gentrifying neighborhoods) and the collective individuation they accommodate. After all, "desire is a problem of groups and for groups", and there can be no psychic individuation without the erotic encounter of bodies, sharing space, projecting idealities and delineating motives and their goals.[28]

---

[28] Lacan's return to Freud anticipates, before virtual worlds, the virtuality of relationships that we understand as commonplace today. Culminating in his dictum 'there is no sexual relation' (Seminar XVII), he understood that instead of direct correspondence between subjects, projections of fantasies (from the male and female position) on the interface of the body (now, perhaps, interfaces of the digital – profiles etc.) constitute erotic relations. Alongside his articulation of the Imaginary and the autonomy of the signifier, this notion of virtuality maps nicely onto the way in which desire is operative on digital platforms in such a way that the subject, now encased in multiple imaginary representations, (profiles available for 24/7 access and consumption) experiences oneself as more and more virtually defined.

2.6. Daddy's Aesthetic Funeral

The death-drive suits the algorithmic interface quite well with its repetition compulsion and appetite for flatness. A fear of growing up that haunts a society that cannot individuate (Lasch, 1979). The tendency to repeat, in style, in speech, in activity and behaviour, the patterns of childhood might be one way we can visualize cultural responses (symptoms) to deterritorialization. The apocalyptic mood that besets millennials and generation z[29], partly induced by economic cynicism (the foreclosure of the future, inevitable downward mobility) and partly by cultural repetition (the formulaic and now nostalgic products of the culture industry) captures their psyches in a state of perpetual adolescence. One may observe these trends not merely in life processes but in style of dress. Caught in a perpetual present, without the narrative tension caused by futures worth living for and sustained by the incessant flow of images, young people today dress uncannily like their parents may have during the time of their childhood.

The rise of 'dadcore' – the phenomenon of huge swaths of people, men and women, choosing to dress in the way their dads did/do, characterized by practical, comfortable, oversized, outdated clothing – perhaps signals a return of the repressed. The figure of the father, highly unpopular and deconstructed and denigrated constantly online in an era of identity politics, in conditions of declining symbolic efficiency, returns in the *imagos* of the subject. The subject refuses to act, live and speak like the father – rejects his symbolic value – but nonetheless chooses, over and over, to perform his *imagos*, to resurrect his imaginary value, demonstrated in the rise and support of harsh, punishing fathers globally: Modi, Erdogan, Bolsonaro, Oban, Salvini, Bernier, Trump, Duterte, etc.

---

[29] The millennial or 'generation y' cohort describes the demographic of those born between the early 1980s up until the late 1990s. Generation z follows the millennial generation and generally refers to those born between the late 1990s, or early 2000s to approximately 2010. Definite dates are disputed among demographers but, if we would like to think of these two generations in terms of Weberian ideal types we could identify millennials, at least in the West, as the first generation to grow up with personal computers and internet access, with their lives punctuated with a memory of the September 11th attacks in 2001 who have come of age in the early 21st century, while those in generation z often do not have a memory of 9/11 and experience access to, or a high level of integration of digital technology in their lives from an early age.

2.7. Despair! (A Rite of Passage)

Individuation is transmitted technically and ethically from generation to generation, with the cultivation of attention and its education at the core of this transmission (Stiegler, 2010, p. 186). Declining symbolic efficiency involves the dissolution of ritual which erases initiation processes from intergenerational relations. Sliding from one state of being (modes based on relations between an individual and the institutions she inhabits at various stages of her life) without symbolic narratives to puncture the experience with meaning can abandon deterritorialized generations in free fall. There is a floating quality to a deritualized 'coming of age.' Interpellation – defined by Althusser as the process through which we receive and internalize the values of culture – often occurs exclusively in highly alienating institutional settings such as the university, the workplace etc. and even then, by virtue of the individualistic and instrumental ideologies of such places, the subject often fails to undergo any initiation at all[30] (1970). The result is that, without the social, psychic or material resources to self-actualize, and without a future on which to project ideals, younger generations slip into addictions – digital, pharmacological, relational etc. Thus, we have the depoliticized, apathetic, disaffected, depressed debtor-addict subject[31]:

---

[30] Hazing and other forms of ritualized humiliation are central to the Greek system on university campuses in North America. These rituals can be seen as initiating students into heteronormative gendered power relations and aimed towards facilitating an acceptance for the domination of controlling, severe, punitive and manipulative forms of masculinity. These toxic forms of initiation receive a normative and even necessary status in the fabric of university social life. Traumatic encounters – inflicted or received, to a large extent, constitute the kind of initiation available in deterritorialized societies. See: harassment and sexual assault scandals at St. Mary's University (2013), St. Michael's College (2018)

[31] Institutional interpellation no longer leads to a symbolic (read: occupational) identity (Standing, 2011). We might consider interpellation as occurring through the constant barrage of images encountered in digital space, but I would argue that this process is incomplete if not interrupted. Interpellation in an image-culture takes on schizophrenic qualities insofar as images invite one to identify with the image, but only until the next image magnetizes our identifications and interrupts the process from completing – image-culture short-circuits the processes of interpellation. This is how I read Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* – symbolic interpellation is replaced by so many imaginary forms of it. Rapid cycling through identities destabilizes the very qualities that make identity psychically beneficial.

The 23 Year Old DOOMER

Maybe plays PS1... sometimes

No hope of career advancement

Alcoholism

tried reading... tried fashion... tried lifting

Ashamed to speak with family

High Risk for Opioid Addiction

Hasn't made a friend since 2012

Another night in

Lost Youth

Cares... but knows there's nothing he can do

Cloud Rap

Has a Tinder but too disgusted to use it

/nightwalk/

In *Madness and Civilization* Foucault writes: "in our time, the politico-religious meaning of festivals has been lost; instead, we resort to alcohol and drugs as a way of contesting the social order and we have thus created a kind of artificial madness…basically an imitation of madness" (1965, p. 340). The debtor-addict subject manufactures mania in compulsive consumption, and simulates depression with 'downers' like opiates and alcohol. Society is mad and blames itself. We make ourselves mad to feel that our psychic state can keep up with the world and mirror its patterning. Capitalist one-dimensionality (instrumental rationality) demands that the subject erase all those parts of her subjectivity that escape its domain of intelligibility – excesses of desire, of decommodified want, hysteria, despair, confusion, lingering, longing, imagining, dreaming – all of it this either reduced and subsumed (commodified) into the deterritorialized field of capitalist relations or repressed into the bottomless enclaves of the unconscious (Marcuse, 1964).

Byung-Chul Han writes that depression derives from the "confrontation between the notion of limitlessness possibilities and the notion of the uncontrolled" – it is a collision of shoulds with 'but hows' (2010, p. 42). The increasing gap between the real ego and the ego-ideal results in autoaggression; the late modern ego devotes most of its libidinal energy to itself. This situation echoes the bad conscience Nietzsche so viciously deconstructed in 1887, wherein repressive society causes the subject, whose instincts cannot be outwardly

52

discharged to turn inwards and, "lacking external enemies, and obstacles, and forced into oppressive narrowness and conformity of custom, impatiently rips himself apart" (1887, p. 57). Such rage against the self is hard to miss. Increasingly, in the age of social media, individuals are pressured to represent the contents of their ego-ideal from within the totality of commodification, as a brand; to prepare a projection that will satisfy the projections of the other. When they fail, self-abnegation is becoming a seductive alternative. Anything to feel like I exist, right?

2.8. Suicidal Culture

Han sees depression as a formless phenomenon, insisting that the late-modern ego has no character but rather, occupies a continuous state of flexibility; a shapeless, formless ego can play any function, it is highly efficient for an economy of precarious work (*ibid*., p. 42). Without symbolic incitements to be curious, project idealities into the future, without faith in the future, without the ability to transform through the cultivation of focus and attention, populations slide into a mode of being where addiction, depression, and isolation are not merely commonplace but normalized. The 'depression memes' phenomenon, where 'meme-makers' (content creators) depict, with an ironic slant, the psychic maladies plaguing themselves and those around them have become a delivery system of cultural negativity – a means to redistribute the neurosis, or at least seek solidarity. They are shared not just by angsty teenagers either – many popular meme-makers are well into their twenties and thirties. In *Society Without the Father* Mitscherlich explains that "apathy in youth" and its attendant crisis of identity now extends into adulthood (1970, p. 153). In online meme-based subcultures, it's no longer taboo to declare you want to die, which is, to some extent, the logical reaction, a way of relaxing the 'excesses of positivity' demanded of neoliberal subjects. These declarations grant us solace, perhaps even jouissance.

But the pleasure in repetitive acts of excessive self-reference has assumed destructive qualities – normalizing and individualizing suicidality depotentiates its political dimension. The normative status of depressive diagnoses serves to depoliticize its social

53

meaning. Melancholy plus equality makes depression the perfect disorder for democratic human beings – the spread of depression memes is a mark of the democratization of the exceptional (Han, 2010, p. 44). The neoliberal imperative to continuously expand, transform and reinvent the self is rejected and reacted to through the indulgence of performative pathology – the late modern ego self-exploits in an effort to generate digital camaraderie to cope with an egoic state where all attachments are severed and where depression has left the ego both objectless and directionless (*ibid*., 43). Lacan links the death drive with what he sees as the suicidal tendency of narcissism, which, in conjunction with Christopher Lasch's thesis that consumer culture actively installs and rewards narcissistic traits, raises the question of narcissism in relation to the 'epidemic of suicide' plaguing post-industrial capitalism societies (2002, p. 186).

In 1935 Walter Benjamin wrote that, "humanity's self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (p. 20). The desolation of modern life can be observed in a glorified form in rap music. Friend and collaborator of the late Mark Fisher, Simon Reynolds points out, in an interview on the Red Scare podcast, that the dialectic of rap begins with a confrontation with "haters", those who envy wealth and success, then leads to a kind of response: I have everything and still, I feel hollow (think Drake or Kanye West), and culminates in the "Xanax rap" culture of today with a hyperaestheticized celebration of depression and fatalism (Red Scare, November 28, 2018). Reynolds calls this effect the "desolation of hyperaffluence" and discusses the transformation of culture's relationship to pharmacological substances as symptomatic of its entropic condition. The collective energies assembled and distributed in the rave culture of the 90's with ecstasy and psychedelics are quite different than those realized in far more solipsistic drugs like Xanax and Ambien that predominate the culture today. "Xanax rap" could been interpreted as a kind of accelerationist mode of expression – a hastening towards apocalypse, singularity or a combination of the two – and the death-drive certainly animates its circulation. While the lyrical content of this genre is often related to fantasies of material abundance, domination and power, the culture surrounding the Xanax rap world generally culminates as a giant attempt to escape the realities of power and the spiritual misery entire generations feel in a neoliberal regime of positivity through the recreational use of anxiety and depression pharmaceutical medications. Xanax rap

exists as the response to atomized individualism and deterritorialization *par excellence.* It is a collective response on behalf of individuals who feel themselves as individual's sick and suffering in a system that, through atomization, negates the possibility that mental illness could have a social rather than individual etiology (Fisher, 2009).

Source: @emo.meme.ho. Posted October 4, 2018 on Instagram.

2.9. Could Depression Memes Politicize Depression?

Data mining consists in making the collective patterns of the unconscious visible and profitable (Han, 2017, p. 79). But despite all this contact with the unconscious, the question of structural (political and socioeconomic) causes of depression and other mental illnesses remains, in most cases, excluded from the discourse. Mental illness is, as Mark Fisher points out, "neurologically instantiated" which "says nothing about its causation" (2009, p. 37). Thus, mental illness requires a social and political explanation. Class politics, however, do tend to creep into some viral images – discontent related to 'meaningless labour', the exhaustion of being constantly broke, the drudgery of everyday life under capitalism – these themes are appearing more frequently, particularly after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Still, this content is produced and consumed on platforms that sell attention to advertisers. The situation resembles a trap. Conjuring a sense of community through shared misery and madness rarely escapes the capitalist entertainment matrix.

Digital reality alters sensual reality. "The effects of technology", Marshall McLuhan explains, "do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily without any resistance" (1964, p. 18). Mental breakdown occurs in varying degrees as a consequence of uprooting and constant inundation with endless information. Byung-Chul Han refers to this process as psychopower, concluding that it is more efficient than biopower (biopolitical governance) insofar as it controls and influences the behaviour of human beings *from within* themselves – not through force or coercion, but through seduction[32] (Han, 2017, p. 80). He sees that digital platforms steer the "unconscious logic" of their users and exploit symbolic misery to turn a profit. Through this, the process of individuation, *vis a vis* attention, gets short-circuited – subjects either fail to realize meaning in their lives and sink into the repetitive compulsions of the death-drive or become magnetized by totalitarian social machines that promise order and belonging.

2.10. Towards Psychopolitics

To counter the pathogenesis of attention destruction and the psychopower of marketing for the economy of attention it induces, we need to develop, implement and regulate what Stiegler and Byung-Chul Han call psychopolitics (2010, 2017). Psychopolitics must delineate the history of attention construction as the formation of a disciplinary transindividuation circuit in order to transform the weaponization of audiovisual media (poison) into an individuating (educational) cure, through awareness of the pharmakological nature of *techne*. Symbolically (and therefore historically) informed

---

[32] Psychopower differs from Foucauldian notions of biopower insofar as biopower aims towards the generative forces of life – ordering, monitoring, optimizing and controlling productive forces. Byung-Chul Han sees biopower as seizing external factors such as reproduction, mortality rates, health conditions etc. and finds this external focus a limitation of this Foucault's theory of power in an age of digital surveillance. Han defines psychopower as an intervention in internal psychological processes, ultimately aimed at shaping and molding thought itself. A key element distinguishing biopower from psychopower is the aperspectival regime of the latter. Where Bentham's panoptican and the optical surveillance of 'Big Brother' could still be grasped as perspectival – the Other of Big Brother is tied to a perception that can be understood. In this regard, psychopower is much more penetrative as, through even more ambiguity, it steers an unconscious logic, it "watches over, control and influences human beings not from outside but from inside" (Han, 2017, p. 80).

psychopolitics would aim to articulate a language that demonstrates the toxicity of psychotechnology and its disruption of temporal consciousness, and more importantly, signify the ways in which, under a neoliberal paradigm, we have become informational consumerists, suffering from a loss of attention and symbolization, making the identification and resistance to psychopower more and more difficult. Critiquing the power structure endemic to communicative capitalism involves a sustained effort to parse out exactly how libidinal energy is mined for profit and what the political implications of datamining, shortening attention spans and deepening alienation are. Traces of this kind of critique are not difficult to find – the internet is teeming with resentments about the internet. But the traversal of techno-utopian fantasies of 'freedom in information' to a historical consciousness of the libidinal economy cannot take place without symbolically potent narratives that spark critical transformations and decisions. Where, and in what state of mind, with what images and language, can a politics of attention be articulated and dispersed?

Chapter 3.   Cyber Sublimation and Desublimation: Confronting the Metaspectacle

"The spectacle obliterates the boundaries between self and world by crushing the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world and it obliterates the boundaries between true and false by driving all lived truth below the real presence of fraud ensured by the organization of appearance. One who passively accepts his alien daily fate is thus pushed toward madness that reacts in an illusory way to this fate by resorting to magical techniques. **The acceptance and consumption of commodities are at the heart of this pseudo-response to a communication without response**. **The need to imitate which is felt by the consumer is precisely the infantile need conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession.**

> *Guy Debord, 196, aphorism No.219*

3.1.   Watching Me, Watching You

Each month in China more than 100 million viewers watch a live online video event. In 2018 live streaming accounts for 95% of China's e-commerce activity, with an estimated $4.4 billion overall revenue, up 32% from reported earnings in 2017.[33] Live streamers perform songs, comedy, discuss beauty, sports, and share their lives with infatuated observers. By sharing they accumulate patrons – viewers who purchase gifts in exchange for a shout-out from the host, an ounce of recognition, while others, pejoratively called 'diasoi', China's most isolated, alienated and poor people, *watch* those who are called 'Kings' (big spenders) and other patrons spend money on streamers. Diasois simulate the spending of money while the patrons simulate human connection while livestreamers simulate love through recognition and loyal viewership.

In *Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord writes that "the spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image" (1983, aphorism No.34). The degree to which livestreamers gain a following is largely dependent upon their ability to accrue capital in the form of 'gifts' – their presence as spectacle is contingent upon their degree of accumulation. Hao Wu's 2018 documentary, *People's Republic of Desire,* traces the class dynamics of this phenomenon, drawing out the threads of China's accelerationism, desire under conditions of deterritorialization, and the human impulse to project and

---

[33] *China's Livestreaming Industry is Booming – Here's How it Works.* Forbes. June 19, 2018. Link: https://www.forbes.com/sites/franklavin/2018/06/19/why-does-china-lead-in-live-streaming/#1d9a710e5dca

worship archetypal figures. In *The Spell of Capital,* Gandesha and Hartle explain that "the uprooting of traditional social relations and community-based forms of life produces a political vacuum, very often filled with the spectacular imagery of concreteness, idols, and violence. These forms of concreteness are, in other words, part of "the spell that capital itself produces" (2017, p. 13). In depicting livestreaming's monetary circuitry, Wu expresses that, even in the utmost deterritorialized conditions, culture still replies with the creation of gods and goddesses with whom identifications can be made – idols to project idealities onto and to watch fall. This social relation mediated by capital structures a fantasy through which one can derive meaning and perhaps generate a sense of belonging. Wu interviews people with a monthly salary of $600 a month who willingly, proudly go into debt to spend $800 on their chosen livestreamer during the monthly competition where all streamers compete to see whose fans can contribute the most money. Streamers are signed by agents and use the medium as a mirror to monetize their performance of a certain archetypal persona. They are swept up in a cycle of being worshipped then denigrated, adored again and then gossiped about.

Through all this, every participant is engaged, in one way or another, with the metaspectacle – some watch others watching an other, some watch others watching them, and some watch the other watching herself. All are "hypnotized by the amputation and extension" of our (collective) being in its new technical form (McLuhan, 1964, p. 11). We are dizzy with the mirrors in front of us, choosing to cast away awareness of the Real, preferring to sink into the womb-like virtual matrix of calculable social capital.

3.2. Reward: Marcuse's Repressive Desublimation

A desymbolized and dissociated milieu is a repressive desublimated one (Stiegler, 2010, p. 69). The purely instrumental operation of desire in the live streaming economy resembles the drive-based feedback loops discussed in chapter two. When mass communications blend seamlessly, unnoticeably, with art, politics, religion, commercials, all realms are reduced to their common denominator: the commodity form (Marcuse, 2006, p. 61). The spectacle, at this point, is so integrated into everyday life that all of reality

presents itself as continuous montage – an unending flow of images without reference, a flat yet hyperreal stream of representation. Marcuse writes, "The salon, the concert, opera, theater are designed to create and invoke another dimension of reality. Their attendance requires festive-like preparation; they cut off and transcend everyday experience" (2006, p. 67). Liquidation of what he calls "two-dimensional culture" involves a collapse of the antagonism between culture and social reality where the "absorbent power of society depletes the artistic dimension by assimilating its antagonistic contents" (*ibid*., p. 64).

Without the tension between culture and society, contradictions that yield transformation (discontent, subversion) cannot be sustained or protected. In *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse is concerned with the elimination of this dissonance – he fears a chorus with only one tone. Without estrangement, art loses its dimension of truth and the world loses its second dimension – that of negation (*ibid*., p. 67). Without negation, much like information without knowledge, we are left with pure positivity, a substance that consists merely in the affirmation of an established order, staving off its critique. The decline of symbolic efficiency begins with the flattening out of contradictions and the smooth incorporation, reproduction, and display of cultural values that used to oppose the order of social reality (Marcuse, 2006, p. 60). Basing his analysis of the countercultural revolution and the disarming of its radical potential partly on Marcuse, Stiegler describes this process as a circuit of "recuperation-implementation" whereby qualities obtained from the repertoire of May 1968' (e.g. individual authentic expression, multitasking, capacity, spontaneity) were translated into management and marketing terms, which ultimately sanctions the establishment of symbolic misery[34] (2014, p. 19).

Symbolic misery is the state that livestreamers, patrons and diasois are attempting to cope with and perhaps even overcome. Together, in desymbolized, deterritorialized conditions, they erect deities and elect to offer sacrifices (money) at the altar, a.k.a. the chat room. This is an attempt at reterritorialization. By entering into the imaginary (purely virtual terrain) to escape the Real (conditions of alienation and abject poverty in some

---

[34] There are, however, alternative reactions to the discourse and event of 1968, beyond neoliberal recuperation. Theorists in the alt-right and 'dark-enlightenment', for example, build on the more reactionary interpretations of 1968, and, instead of assimilating the language and ideals of the moment into their lexicon, view the event as emblematic of the left's inherent impotence and the impossibility of "progress" based on political struggle towards revolution.

cases), participants generate a symbolic dimension to their lives through the construction of calculative, monetizable evaluations of one another. This follows the formula Jodi Dean highlights in *Blog Theory*: gaps in the symbolic web are filled in the virtual, with imaginary images (2010). I will demonstrate the ubiquity and efficiency of this formula by analyzing two films.

3.3.   Traverse the Imaginary for Symbolic Revival

Harmony Korine's 2007 film *Mister Lonely* and Steven Spielberg's 2017 film *Ready Player One* are both films aptly demonstrating the traversal of the imaginary as an attempt to generate symbolic meaning. The former follows a commune of celebrity impersonators, a collective of social outcasts who identify with a celebrity to such an extent that this celebrity's persona overwrites most of their own identity. This identification simplifies the process of discovering 'authenticity' of the self by filling in the aesthetic precepts of identity with cultural signifiers. Also, it unleashes a new sense of freedom for each character in that he or she does not need to articulate a coherent ego, before the adoption of the celebrity persona, the character deals with egoic precarity and therefore chooses to adopt and inhabit an ego already symbolically defined through its systematic recognition via the culture industry.

Each celebrity ego comes with a series of gestures, modes of speech, self-presentation etc. through which the character can organize his social self and establish relations with others. This gives the impersonators a break from the tasks of the ego, namely, defenses, individuation and maintenance of a relative consistency. These personas are symbolic to the extent that the qualities embodied by each celebrity are iconic – chosen are the celebrities that constitute a star system – Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Abraham Lincoln etc. – which, at a time when popular culture exists as the dominant medium composing an ideological network, confers considerable psychosocial advantages. That the impersonators must embody the stars of decades past also signals that culture itself as lapsed into self-reflexive nostalgic loop, the historical star system is a symbolic anchor for the maintenance and orientation of American identities.

61

The celebrity personas are, however, staged at the level of the imaginary insofar as they exist on a purely conscious level. TV and film operate through images yet evoke symbolic meanings – they puncture and inform the unconscious channels of awareness. Images are imaginary but they long to be grafted onto a symbolic narrative – to collapse the interpretative potentiality into manageable, intelligible structures of meaning. What Marilyn Monroe and Michael Jackson represent is a particular mode of being that is consistent with a web of significations that disclose symbolic associations: beauty, tragedy, fate etc. Thus, what *Mister Lonely* demonstrates is that it is by going *through* this imaginary register of identification that characters in the film gain access to the symbolic register of *meaning* to compensate for their otherwise deterritorialized, hollow, confusing and hyperfragmented lives.

Entrance into the imaginary helps the characters organize and exist socially and connect intimately and with a sense of vulnerability and spontaneity. The work of identity-building is eased and symbolic power is predetermined by the role one has *already* chosen, the freedom to be oneself presents itself within the limitations of symbolic (socially encoded) identifications. This mode of identification is opposed to the fluctuating, vulnerable, precarious, hybrid, transient, modes of identification taking place in a purely imaginary realm. Without the limits of symbolic horizons, the freedom to be who one is in a culture obsessed with categorization and egoic consistency, is admittedly overwhelming. The neoliberal injunction to produce oneself as if an entrepreneur of oneself – to be efficient, perform perfectly, to continuously 'improve' etc. is intolerable. Thus, we cling to symbolic dimensions that demand certain performances of us, based on collectively recognized scripts. Otherwise, the anxiety of becoming the ideal object for the desire of an uncertain and changing other, becomes too much to bear and we burn out or fail to feel like we exist at all.

Where *Mister Lonely's* cast achieve symbolic meaning by entering into and inhabiting the imaginary realm, the characters in Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* generate symbolic stakes through immersion in the purely virtual. The characters in *Ready Player One* confront a crisis of meaninglessness in a dystopian world decimated by ecological and economic collapse and opt, on a mass scale, to escape this decrypt reality through a virtual simulation. The 'Oasis' is a virtual reality, fully experienced in body and

vision by real flesh and blood human beings who exist, in reality, in mobile-homes (trailers) stacked on top on one another in slums outside the ostensibly metropolitan center. Individuals enter the Oasis at all times of the day, only taking breaks to eat, sleep and excrete. Here, the virtual overcodes the status of reality, ascending to the status of being more real than the Real.

Nothing happens in reality, it cannot compete with the dense, fast and hyperreal terrain of the Oasis. Inside the Oasis, players take up an identity with frictionless ease, transforming their physical appearance at a whim. An 11-year-old boy exists as a 27-year-old assassin and a butch woman exists as an extremely built male who runs a virtual garage, fixing cars and other machines while intermittently executing monsters throughout the day – there are no representational limits – imaginary identities are hybrid, fluid, unfixed, always shifting (Dean, 2010). Characters in the Oasis exemplify this mode of identity in its purest form. They can transcend and recreate themselves at any moment, matching their presentation of self with their ego-ideal like never before. And unlike in the real world, where malaise stifles and truncates social relations, a sense of heightened meaning permeates the Oasis. It is while occupying these imaginary identities that symbolic stakes rise up. A line of dialogue confirms this: *"it isn't about what you do in the Oasis, it's about who you can become."*

3.4.   Nostalgic Symbolic Coordinates

Stepping outside the normative cynicism that shrouds the social conditions of late capitalism, we may conceive of our own world in this way, hopeful for all the possibilities available to ourselves while nauseated or exhausted by the persistent injunction to *become* who you *are* – the notion figures more as a nagging, anxiety-provoking demand than a potentiality for Being. This is, of course, because exchange logic has colonized the unconscious, social links etc. and because we cannot step outside a paradigm that configures the self as project is imposed on us from every angle, we are tired of producing our subjectivity in alignment with neoliberal ideals and therefore crave permission to simply Be. The Oasis sidesteps the Real and constructs a reality that has one necessary limitation to generate stakes high enough so that meaning can be transmitted but not *so*

high that the subject feels paralyzed with responsibility and impossibility. It is a game, a virtual world, a simulation – ultimate freedom. Symbolic coordinates are built into the Oasis. In Spielberg's film this virtual reality was founded by James Halliday who embodies the creative yet tragic genius archetype. Halliday creates the virtual world, essentially 'saving' entire populations of people from a life of psychic despair and abject material misery. Then he dies, leaving behind a contest in his legacy in which players must find an "easter egg" inside a gate that requires three keys hidden in the virtual worlds – the winner will receive full ownership and control of the Oasis: a phantasmagoric corporate lottery. Here we have the heroic call-to-action, accompanied by chains of signification related exclusively to the cultural objects that allegedly influenced Halliday's creative decisions, all of which are meticulously documented and ready for discovery. The quest is defined, the master signifier established (the quest continuously asks, 'what would Halliday do?' thus, the name-of-the-father is invoked) and a symbolic order is deployed through cultural (nostalgic) objects, capturing the minds and motivations of many Oasis players.

An instructive angle to emphasize here is that, devotion to Halliday, the notion of merit, and the entire moral system relies upon apprehension of a specific set of cultural knowledge – a series of nostalgic 80's references – all tied to the affinities of one man. What could be more emblematic of the logical conclusion of the total occupation of everyday life by the culture industry? Access to symbolic meaning and material success relies upon this knowledge – culture folds in on itself, eats itself, reproduces itself from itself (Adorno, 1991). And yet, this is enough, the attributes of this man, being the creator of the salvation that is the Oasis, organizes an entire symbolic system, creating desires, motivations and meanings.

In both of these films, the symbolic and imaginary coalesce to produce a web of meaning through which existence can be justified, organized and explained. A deterritorialized universe animated by the logic of exchange alone cannot produce this type of meaning. As defined in chapter one, Lacan determines that meaning can only be derived in moments when the imaginary and symbolic registers merge; their fusion reterritorializes subjective existence, adding a layer of significance and installing a network of semblance that functions in such a way that the subject feels himself more firmly anchored in a social

world and able to express and experience affective waves that are understandable and rationally aligned with this social world.

3.5. Retreat into the Meta: Nostalgia as Distance

For the audience, Harmony Korine's cast of celebrity interpreters in *Mister Lonely* is an instance of metaspectacle. Here, the meta dimension implies a kind of nostalgic distance. Žižek writes that "in nostalgia the gaze of the other is domesticated, "gentrified", instead of the gaze erupting like a traumatic disharmonious blot, we have the illusion of seeing ourselves seeing", or seeing the gaze itself (1991, p.113). In nostalgia, our relation is split between fascination and ironic distance (Žižek, 1991, p. 114). In conditions of deterritorialization – any distance, ironic or otherwise, softens the traumatic impact of the Real absent of symbolic meaning to mediate its surfacing. *Mister Lonely* and *Ready Player One* both, although in slightly different ways, exist as *a spectacle within a spectacle*. Both introduce characters who present and embody remnants of nostalgic cultural objects for themselves and each other, while, one degree removed, is us – the audience, watching their stories unfold, spectating on the spectators of a spectacle. Assuming a celebrity persona as a substitute for one's own persona requires entry into a virtual world, a space of recalling images and reproducing them through imitation. Likewise, the characters in *Ready Player One* fill gaps in the symbolic order by way of virtual simulation to gain access to meaningful relationships, goals, personal mythologies, social order etc.

Mark Fisher explains that, in dealing with a crisis of symbolic efficiency, we tend to retreat into the meta, opting to deal with "metafictional anxieties about the function of the author" and other forms of reflexive incorporation of procedure into art rather than the art itself (2009, p. 47). In this way, the function of nostalgia operates in tandem with the meta dimension. In culture, objects of nostalgia are extracted from their historical context and dislocated from continuity to be instead, inserted into a kind of "mythic, eternal, timeless, present" (Žižek, 1991, p. 112). We eliminate knowledge of historical contingency and elevate cultural signifiers so that a realm of the eternal can be established, and the present can be *symbolically placed* as if it were part of some mythic process (a totality of meaning). We are, Žižek finds, continually fascinated with the gaze of the mythic "naive"

spectator who is still able to "take it [the spectacle] seriously" (1991, p. 111). The liquidation of the contradiction between social reality and culture that Marcuse discusses, contributes to the sense that it is becoming increasingly difficult to take anything seriously at face value.

We are trained in the scripts of spectacle, tired of their continuous rehearsal and longing for new ways of seeing. We have been performing ourselves to ourselves for too long – we have run out of anything new, out of the ruins of modern life, to dramatize. The possibility of the "new" – something profound and transformative to disrupt the sense of cyclical futility – has been conceived of by the futurists, transhumanists, and techno-utopians like Elon Musk or Ray Kurzweil. Kurzweil's notion of an imminent 'singularity'––a paradigmatic merging of mind and machine – or Musk's mission to 'colonize' Mars speak to the level of symbolic misery present at large in post-industrial societies.

That we have exhausted our means to establish worthwhile modes of being in the world that do not involve a radical alteration in the fabric of reality or escape to another planet speaks to the implicit failure of societies to become technical without losing their erotic, symbolic and imaginative potency. This technomic desire to establish either new terrain or new textures of experience through escape (to another planet, to another plane) already receives ironic cynical reproach from those who see their material conditions in decline but are met with technocratic solutions that avoid addressing the root of suffering (precarity, competition, dissolved kinship structures etc.) Instead of waiting for the singularity or fantasizing about life on Mars, deterritorialized subjects vector out, into the meta, to can gain the necessary distance for things to become interesting, new or worth our attention again. It is the meta that is operationalized as a space where untrodden (cultural) terrain might exist – fresh ground for engagement so that we might develop new insights to furnish the cultural imaginary with novelty and therefore the possibility of spontaneous action/reaction (experienced as authenticity.) Just like irony in the nascent stages of postmodernism, immersion in the meta becomes an effort to regenerate or resurrect meaning from the corpse of one-dimensional culture.

This meta dimension is accessed compulsively in digital social fields. With the emergence of social media came the commoditization of information, and to a large extent, the commodification of the self in new and profound ways. From this, the spectacle, to a

previously unimaginable extent, has begun to colonize interpersonal space (the unconscious, intersubjectivity, communication etc.) through the collection of metadata. As chapter two demonstrated, we are immersed in a *simulation* of authentic interpersonal action while being mined for informatic value. In this process we see the transformation of social reality into economic hyperreality as the simulacra's value is made real via its monetization. Here, virality ascends to become the core expression of value in this relationship, transmuting the original value, novelty.[35]

3.6. For Sale: Novelty

Paradoxically, one confronts what appears to be endless and abundant digital content with the promise of encountering digital objects as novel, but soon realizes that to some extent, true novelty, just as true imagination is impoverished. For Freud, novelty is "always the condition of enjoyment", central to the pleasure principle (1920, p. 611). Novelty is a libidinally exchanged as a value of excitation, it stimulates, binds and molds cultural expression. A deficit of novelty incurs mere repetition: the compulsion to repeat, to re-experience something as identical (*ibid*., p. 611). Impoverishment of the so-called new becomes an unceasing encounter with Nietzsche's "the eternal return of the same" (1961). In this ocean of sameness, all that's left is all-you-can-eat metanovelty: a mass-circulation of transient 'hot-takes': refresh and reload, forever searching for a semblance of the new. It is no longer enough to take in the news as is, instead, we seek out commentary about the news and then go even further to encounter the commentary about the commentary on the news. The dimension of the meta and the insistence on novelty has morphed the information economy into the meme economy.

---

[35] Monetizing social media takes many different forms. Data firms sell user data towards niche advertising, the collection of biometric data, but also, more recently, towards the manipulation of political opinion as we have seen with Cambridge Analytica – a British political consulting firm which combined data mining, data brokerage, and data analysis with strategic communication to influence the 2016 American electoral process. See: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/26/the-cambridge-analytica-files-the-story-so-far

3.7. From Information Economy to Meme Economy

In facing a shortage of novelty and thus also authenticity, it is the representation of the representation of experience that gains primacy. The meme economy that we find ourselves fully enmeshed in insists that representation take precedence over experience as the object of awareness. This means we are aware of pre-digested experience, constructed through an external gaze of an Other before we attempt to drink the experience *in itself* into awareness. Here, essence precedes existence, we are taught how to feel, respond and act through what tends to be a neurotic representation before the chance for action ever even arises. Novelty is built into the exchange of simulacra insofar as it reconstitutes the Real by disassembling and reassembling it time and time again. The thing-in-itself or experience is rarely, if ever, novel.

We retreat into the meta because we cannot remain with the spectacle in itself for itself, it must become, for itself in itself – we must gaze upon it from within a framework that keeps subjectivity and process visible and integrated throughout. This is clearly demonstrated in the observation that much of popular entertainment fixates on the biography of the entertainers themselves or on the technical or emotional *production of* the spectacle, or the *effect* the spectacle has on its observers – all forms of the spectacle's deconstruction. Christopher Lasch suggests that people tend to talk "not of things themselves, but of their images" (1979, p. 119. In the age of metaspectacle we discuss not the event itself, but the impression the event has made, or we discuss *the impression the that the impression of the event* has made.

We are obsessed with subjectivity – its inner split, its frantic energy, its narrative, its disintegration, its capitulation, its tensions. Livestreaming in China, and in the West for that matter, (livestreaming platform Twitch has 45 billion minutes watched each month[36]), is so deeply enthralling and popular because it invites viewers to engage in a form of metanovelty – shake off the shackles of sincerity and identity and embrace the spontaneity of life at a comfortable distance. Metanovelty is structured through the fetishism of banal or extravagant representations of the minutiae of daily life, the intersubjective texture of

---

[36] https://twitchtracker.com/statistics

which has been absent from the realm of consumable content for most of human history. Drowning in an endless sea of information, we become both overwhelmed and consumed with the new texture of public spectacle that the meta dimension introduces. This way of seeing reduces the event to its image and then further reduces it to the impact of its image, which, ultimately acts as a coping mechanism to help manage the growing sense of cognitive-saturation that Stiegler identifies.

3.8.   Sorting(Coping)-Mechanisms

In his analysis of commentary as a form of discourse, Foucault identified that novelty no longer existed in what is said, but rather, in its reappearance (1972, p. 222). Likewise, the late American novelist David Foster Wallace foresaw with TV the psychosocial consequences that the meta dimension introduces, noticing that once a medium introduces the element of watching, acknowledging itself, the "referential stakes go way up" (1993, p. 34). Wallace remarks that as we consume higher and higher doses of meta-entertainment, we begin to start "watching ourselves watching", retreating into our ourselves, becoming "vastly more spectatorial and self-conscious", heightening levels of alienation, solipsism and loneliness (*ibid*., p. 34, 38). The separation that nostalgia, irony and the meta afford is not without costs. While these strategies protect consciousness from the trauma of sincerity (vulnerability) and shield from a direct encounter with the Real, they also alienate consciousness from itself (and the unconscious) and barricade the ego inside itself. Affecting a casual, ironic or detached demeanor is, in the end, still a defense mechanism. The way we treat the spectacle reflects the way we treat ourselves.

Memes gain their potency through ironic and nostalgic distance from 'common sense' and 'capitalist realism' – the only forms of distance still available to the neoliberal subject. Memes, for example, seduce attention by playing by their own rules, because, they "inaugurate a mode of circulation" that is both "secretive and ritualistic" – their presence disrupts the nature of intersubjectivity by preemptively declaring a reality before one has the chance to manifest (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 163). In this way, they inoculate an unparalleled sense of self-consciousness

69

Now we watch ourselves watch others being watched. Perhaps the referential stakes have risen to such a level that we have, in our overstimulation, done away with reference altogether – choosing rather to navigate an empty sphere that content-heavy but referentially deprived? In algorithmic realities the markers of referential location, with the exception of nostalgic signifiers or online projections of ego-ideals, have escaped us. Sifting through the the sea of metaspectacle, there is nothing apart from metadata (browsing history) to ground or explain content. And yet, for the online consumer, this does not matter, because life in digital meta enclaves, despite being chaotic, isolating and alienating, is consistently denser, quicker, and more *alive* than the offline world. So, while consciously we may perceive that we "crave" novelty, perhaps what the unconscious truly desires is more of the same, with a slight ironic twist: attempts to make the familiar evermore strange, perhaps even uncanny, mirroring the contradictory and unbound energy that defines the unconscious.

Internet memes are the most ubiquitous example of the metaspectacle. Memes absorb us, condense and depict our social relations and communicate to us information about ourselves and the rapidly shifting cultural discourse. We search for ourselves in memes and perform ourselves through the sharing of them. The cultural unconscious animates memes – we compulsively collapse the theatre of being into their varied formats. Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" in 1971 in his book *The Selfish Gene,* describing it as the cultural analogue of the gene; a "gene of culture." This analogue has its place in the evolution of information in the realm of human consciousness. Today, billions of people are networked together as a giant computational system of cultural information, enhanced in the work of information manipulation cybernetically through computational devices. This networked universe has ushered in a feedback loops between communications technology and cultural change, so entangled and reinforcing that together they act as a singular catalyst bringing about accelerations in the realm of economic, spiritual and cultural neurosis. The structure of communicative capitalism is based on a selection criterion centered on a meta-novel value or *virality* that accrues energy through the servicing of neuroses and new psychological excesses like narcissism, alienation and solipsism. How many likes and shares a meme gets suggests the level of unconscious truth it contains – in a society that is both more permissive (culturally) and more repressive

70

(politically, economically) than ever, the need a psychosocial expressive apparatus like memes becomes paramount.

For consciousness to absorb the mass amounts of information presented to it in an 'information economy', commentary is required to significantly reduce the possibilities for interpretation and thus, overall epistemological complexity. For the meme economy to persist, it is crucial that information coalesce in a way that can be digested and assimilated through the already installed gaze of the Other. This explains why memes – affective parcels of novelty-value – are in such high demand within a society asymmetrically divided with too many subjects-who-need-to-know and a deficit in subjects-who-know. Or perhaps, insofar as the internet democratizes the means of expression and decenters expert cultures, memes are in high supply and rapid circulate as competing nodes of cultural expertise. It may be the case that more and more of us have entered into the position of subject-supposed-to-know by virtue of the sheer amount of information available and memes are simply the vehicle through which commentary, specialized knowledge and political orientation can be condensed and transmitted in the most efficient way possible. This is all to say that the spectacle alone does not satisfy, in Lacanian terms, the *jouissance* of the subject. Only the metaspectacle, in all its political contours and social residue, can capture an ounce of one's attention.

In 2007 David Foster Wallace noticed this tendency when he described the need for "deciders": those who would help one cope with the "massive, high entropy amounts of information and ambiguity and conflict and flux" in the "total noise" of postmodern culture (p. 8). For Wallace, deciders[37] help filter and structure mass amounts of information in a meaningful way so as to make the noise manageable. Today, the deciders in a digital information society are not bound exclusively to institutional power, but rather, the role of the decider is dispersed infinitely throughout the spectrum of prosumer fields – the first prosumer perhaps being a worker in Henry Ford's factory, building and then, in the post-war period, purchasing a Model T automobile. In the context of digitality Jodi Dean sees

---

[37] A contemporary and more heavily market-oriented version of this term might be the now-ubiquitous term 'influencer', used to describe individuals who possess a significant social media following and have substantial social influence or expert knowledge in a specific field – key in contemporary marketing strategies. Brands reach out to influencers and offer payment in exchange for a kind of 'testimonial advertising.' In China influencers are known as key opinion leaders (KOL).

the prosumer as a product that emerges "under the conditions of intensive and extensive proliferation of media" wherein everyone adopts the roles of both producer and consumer of content simultaneously (2009, p. 24). Meta-commentary poses as the cure to the noise of data by offering narrativized informatic schemas within mediated networks of communication. In conditions of declining symbolic efficiency, we cannot believe just words, we accept very little on face value, we seek second, third and fourth opinions and even then, as Dean notices, we still suspect experts or authorities of specialized knowledge (the subject supposed to know) were paid off, corrupt, or invested in an opposing ideology – or we emphasize the hyper-plurality facing us: even experts consistently disagree (2009, p. 163). The consequence of this is in navigating excessive amounts of metacommentary, intended messages get lost, becoming mere contributions to the swelling circulation of images, opinion, and information, all spectacles competing for an ounce of attention, accumulating consumer metadata and thus profit for those who own our digital social factories.

One of the consequences of attentional-capture is the destruction of care, emanating from the destruction of long-circuits of reason, lingering and contemplation (Stiegler, 2010). This involves a weakening of the the *will* to sublimate anxious, aggressive, erotic energies because the media platforms enabling and encouraging desublimation are fair more available, and considerably less psychically demanding to engage with than creative productions (Stiegler, 2015). Digital platform capitalism tends to reward manifestations of desublimation (the repetition compulsions of the death drive) simply because the products of repetition smoothly transmute into capitalist accumulation.

Memes, like capital, circulate parasitically, but unlike capital which deterritorializes space and time, memes work to reterritorialize psychic and social space. "Memes are a positive feedback vector between symbolic relations and reality itself."[38] And in an information society where the average subject is generally overwhelmed by the sheer volume of content inundating consciousness at any given time, memes are a necessary simplification mechanism. And yet they participate in the fracture of attention

---

[38] Anonymous document posted by the admin of 'Altwoke dank accelerationist c u l t u r e j a m" Facebook page. Link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/17ozY_y0aVdXkI72y5FGCAq0F-KbKlTPlYXq0uK9xy0A/edit?usp=sharing

and installation of repetition compulsions or obsessional neuroses; memes are *pharmakon* (both poison and cure) – an attempt at the creation of "new forms of society capable of performing" and arguing with itself in "critically literate terms", not unlike the attempts made by Surrealism and Futurism before them (Zaslove, 1983, p.41). There are many forms of memetic discourse, but embedded in a vast majority of them is the spirit of critique, perhaps even 'détournement' – the metaspectale as a "refashioning and re-purposing of the spectacle in such a way that undermines its initial aims", in line with the Situationist International slogan: 'We express what's on everyone's minds' (Gandesha & Hartle, 2016, p. 15).

Considering all of this one can generally assume that the subject, or "prosumer" takes in more and more images yet absorbs less and less meaning. The fantasy of abundance, and proliferation of enigmatic signifiers function so as to cause images to lose their specificity, destined to simply merge into the larger flow of data surrounding it. Dean claims that this "morphing of message into contribution is a constitutive feature" of a communicative capitalism wherein "communication functions symptomatically to produce its own negation" (2009, p. 26). In an accelerating meme culture, images combine to signify concepts beyond their singularity. Memes themselves lose significance within hours or days of their origination.[39]

3.9.   Metaspectacle: The Living Tongue

Guy Debord saw the spectacle as that which aims at nothing other than itself, constituting "*the main* production of present-day society" (1963, No. 14). The spectacle exists as a vehicle for novelty. Debord writes, "wherever there is independent representation the spectacle reconstitutes itself" (*ibid*., No. 18). The spectacle harnesses attention through its circulation within technology "based on isolation", reinforcing the conditions of isolation and corresponding to economic manufacture of alienation (*ibid*., No. 18-31). But in a meme economy, context is removed, and the scene appears empty. So, to follow Jean Baudrillard, the spectacle that digital civilization confronts is one which

---

[39] There are, of course, exceptions where a meme continues to circulate months, or even years after its creation. As a rule, however, memes are as ephemeral as it gets.

abolishes discourse, one that describes not a familiar reality but a void and absence found in the representational hierarchy [of ontology] (2001, p. 157).

The metaspectacle seduces with vulnerability. We are bored, afraid, disillusioned, and distant. Without pause, we are ready to fill the void. It also rewards desublimation. Thus, the metaspectacle is both an agent of and site of production of libidinal exploitation. And that which slips out of the frame of meaning reemerges with the promise to divert attention in order to collapse awareness of the void. The return of the repressed populating the metaspectacle is always a return where repressed contents are reduced to absurdity and dissolved in the sea of images that surround it. Take the example discussed in chapter two: depression memes. These depict, in representational forms, the repressed discourse of despair simmering just below the conscious superego that demands capitalist productivity and its attendant injunction to 'happiness.' But these depictions, shored up from the cultural unconscious, go beyond mere representation to parody themselves and, in doing so, achieve a level of hyperreality, carrying an acknowledgement of their own futility as ephemeral images.

The complexities of social life: sex, death, desire, violence, loneliness, anxiety etc. are channeled into continuously renewed metaspectacles – produced and reproduced everyday (hour, minute etc.) – and in this way, metaspectacles exist as a kind of *living tongue*, a constantly changing representation of culture understanding itself. But this living tongue begins to overshadow that which takes place outside of it, it starts to overcode the psyche with frameworks that are not experientially, but imaginarily derived. However, the paradox with depression memes, discussed in chapter two, is that, while they express frustration at the way in which digitality (and capitalism) reduce all relations to their calculative function, they participate in the calculative logic of communicative capitalism insofar as they garner likes and shares – quantified forms of recognition.

Digital social fields also function as a kind of substitute feedback loop when inadequate feedback loops at the level of embodied social experience are unavailable. The repetitious drive to refresh, post (output), wait, receive input, check, engage, refresh etc. supplants the drive to form long-circuits of sociality that pierce the realm of intimacy and the recognition it affords. Here, the metaspectacle short-circuits the logic of displaced

desire. It is this drive toward recognition (social resonance, love) that the metaspectacle, in its capacity to capture circulate and encode, becomes the site of distraction *par excellence.*

The social shrinks at the thought of reconstituting the gaps in the symbolic so it conceals it with persistent imaginary distraction. Crucially, the spectacle assigns meaning through implicit or explicit interpretative formulas. Even before the meta intervenes, the spectacle subliminally asserts a method for assessing, absorbing and relating the meaning it emits. Translating original meaning no longer tempts the postmodern consumer or services the drive toward narcissistic reification of the self. Today a vast majority of the political content consumed and produced fixates mainly on commentary *about* the spectacle. Concern is only for images – "impressions overshadow achievements" (and failures) – the event in itself is divorced from consideration, only its elucidation, which exists as a social relation, garners attention (Lasch, 1979, p. 118). Lasch theorizes that the use of game during the Cold War spurned a kind of obsession with appearance over reality where "public relations and propaganda have exalted the image and the pseudo-event" such that focus aims toward strategic positioning via imagistic representation (1979, p. 118-119). We live in the hangover and amplification of this obsession with images and consequently, experience nothing more than a simulation of authentic political discourse.

In the realm of spectacle, social discourse turns into an economically mediated popularity contest disguised as political commentary. In the "phantasmagoria" of spectacle-consciousness the mind, writes Jerry Zaslove, becomes a kind of "labyrinth in the stock exchange where images separate the lives of spectators from each other" (1983, p. 41). Zaslove sees spectacle-consciousness as "assimilating (proletarian) class-consciousness into cultural dilemmas of the bourgeoisie's anxiety about property and culture" (*ibid.*, p. 43). With social media, the 'political' circulates as a collection of competing cultural impressions. Spectators start to look to politics for entertainment and entertainment for political commentary. We are witnessing what Alexis de Tocqueville noticed in 1830, namely that the spectacle aimed to "stir the passions more than gratify the taste" (1945, p. 73). This adequately describes the formula for the outrage-industrial machine or purpose of the social web: to compulsively inoculate potent affect in order to shield from the possibility of action or even true interrogation, functioning as a fracturing reification machine, producing scapegoating resentment that, in a short-circuiting libidinal

economy, can only congeal in neoliberal narcissism and parasitic identitarian politics. Chapter four will examine the resulting identity-based political landscape in more detail.

3.10. The Internet as Pharmakon: Counterarguments

There are, of course, counterarguments that recast this dismal portrayal of the Internet and its attendant spectacle-consciousness as containing some elements of liberatory potential. In their seminal work, *Empire,* Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt demonstrate the pharmakological dynamic active in the political dimensions of the Internet, characterizing the new global communications infrastructure as a hybrid of both democratic and oligopolistic models of governance (2000, p. 299). Reminding us that the Internet, originally a project headed by DARPA (the U.S. Defense Department Advanced Research Projects Agency), Hardt and Negri illustrate that two operations flow through networked communications simultaneously: centralization and decentralization (*ibid.*, p. 300). The rhizomatic, deterritorializing and democratic aspects of the internet undermine the concept of private property and allow the public to participate in a more "radical and profound commonality than has ever been experienced in the history of capitalism – they initiate a novel form of freedom (*ibid.*, p. 302). Phenomenologically, this rings true – the Internet opens us up to an entirely new horizon of sociality as our economic and social reality is defined less by material objects and more by communication and information which is collaboratively produced through horizontal networks of relationship (*ibid.*, 302). Hardt and Negri see the emancipatory potential in this rhizomatic organization insofar as production is redefined to mean "constructing cooperation and communicative commonalities" – relying on collective imaginings and endeavors of expression at its base in a world where communication and information are themselves the chief commodities in circulation (*ibid.*, p. 302). At the same time, they understand that with new technologies come new inequalities, as the rush to centralize this new decentralized terrain reasserts the oligopolistic tendencies instrumental in the capitalist mode of production (*ibid.*, p. 300). This freedom becomes a vacuum for power. We see the impulse towards centralization of control in the power structure of global infrastructure operative in the privatization of information and communication with technology giants like IBM, Microsoft, AT&T,

Google, Amazon, etc. (*ibid*., p. 300). The neoliberal project to privatize the commons is resisted, to some extent by the democratic qualities of the Internet, particularly in the conceptual crisis it brings with regards to 'private property', but we are seeing, more and more, corporations (and governments) seizing democratic platforms, which carries severe consequences for political organizers, activists and dissidents, artists, and everyday citizens.

In *The Net Delusion*, Evgeny Morozov argues that information is the "oxygen of our age" but it "helps keep dictators on life support" (2011, p. 148). Morozov examines the policing and surveillance strategies undertaken by governments, with the assistance of the private technology sector, to introduce a climate of uncertainty, anxiety and fear in the face of digital state power. He sees the mobilization of malware, spyware, DDOS attacks, tracking of digital footprints etc. as constructing an ambiguous threat on behalf of the state, claiming that activists are forced to self-censor in the face of surveillance, knowing it exists but unsure of how it works and the extent of it (*ibid*., p. 149). With the Arab Spring, Libyan Revolution, and Occupy as only a few examples of massive political mobilization via digital networks, Morozov highlights that while political communication has migrated online, so has political repression (*ibid*., p. 152). Aggregating digital trails (which we leave with every post, comment, click) into one data set can produce insights into human behaviour, point to new trends and helps predict public reactions to particular social and political developments – all of which makes suppressing dissent easier for states as well as corporations. On top of all of this, information overload or 'cognitive saturation syndrome' (in 2008 the average American consumed 34 Gb of data a day) leads to a kind of political paralysis and psychic entropy (*ibid.,* p. 167). The ambiguity inherent to an informational infrastructure that is both democratic and oligopolistic is difficult to navigate, never mind organize within. Therefore, residual tensions, both political and social, are channeled into short-circuiting metaspectacles that express this sense of paralysis in hyperbolic, absurdist and ironic ways – which is still preferable to silence.

3.11. Political Impotence or, Libidinal Nihilism

The spectacle and metaspectacle seed the soil of a populous libidinally compromised: constantly stirred, gratified with sideshows, attentionally-fatigued while compulsively overdosing on reactive media – a society of addicts whose central nervous system has been hijacked by the entertainment matrix. To quote Wallace, "television" [or with a slight alteration, the internet] has "become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism" (1990, p. 50). At this point, passive nihilism is so ubiquitous, it becomes normative and thus, rendered invisible. The more consumed we are by the ebb and flow of moral currency in the sea of online political commentary, the less willing we will be to confront the truth of class and empire vibrating beneath the surface of awareness. In an age where information amasses, rather than be told where to look and how to react, we leap at opportunities to construct metameanings – the illusion of creative thought – we dissect and reassemble the spectacle so that it can still be interesting enough to keep us feeling as though we are in fact engaged with the political.

3.12. Baudrillard and the 'Mood of a Lost Reality'

The spectacle is a diversion, and the metaspectacle only entrenches its power. Memes, or metaspectacles, are the "detritus of social life"; to use Baudrillard, they "react to it [social life] and parody its theatricality: which is why they are scattered and juxtaposed in the randomness of their appearance" (1990, p. 157). Metaspectacles confirm not the existence of an additional reality but rather, the absence of one in the first place. Their appearance and reappearance "haunt the emptiness of a scene", seducing attention with the narcotic nullification of the Real (*ibid*., p. 157). There is an undoubted correlation between the emergence of a meme-culture which absorbs the Real, swallows spontaneous activity with its impulse to represent its contours in an exaggerated form and the air of social paralysis and acute anxiety that constitute so much of experience today.

Considering the way in which memes parasitically circulate in information channels (algorithmic realities), we see that they manifest as objects without referents,

bouncing from host to host. Only in this scheme where we consume the metaspectacle devoid of context could the "mood of a lost reality" truly take its grasp (*ibid*., p. 158). To quote Baudrillard, this form of image as simulacra without perspective or a "*trompe-l'oeil*": appearing "suddenly, with sidereal unease, as if stripped of the aura of meaning and bathed in empty accuracy" (*ibid*., p. 158). Mimicking or even surpassing the effect of the real, the trompe-l'oeil gains its ironic power only by "radically questioning the principle of reality" or the reality principle (*ibid*., p. 159). The surreal atmosphere this new affective and informatic environment produces, manages to seize the ontological structure and disintegrate the ground on which it was built. It is the quintessential expression of an effort to reterritorialize a culture and moment of human subjectivity that has been utterly deterritorialized.

What constitutes the pharmakological dynamism inherent to the metaspectacle is its potential to further entrench us in 'capitalist realism' by libidinally neutralizing and diverting attention (complacency or Fromm's 'automaton conformity) (1965) *or* to exist as a container for Nietzsche's creative exhibitionism, enabling a co-construction of new registers of meaning in order to expose the contradictions of capitalism and go beyond them (activation of the creative will). On one hand, the metaspectacle can be another medium of distraction, and on another, a medium of reterritorialization, a means to integrate the unconscious into the field of spectacle (Benjamin, 1935, p. 18). Nonetheless, the predominance of metaspectacle in the culture industry was prepared by decades of a phantasmagoric world of capital and commodity that is reaching its limit in terms of novelty in a stagnating technocratic neoliberal order, defaulting necessarily to nostalgic redux.

3.13. Seducing the Unconscious: Interpassivity

Walter Benjamin explained that just as the camera introduces us to unconscious optics, psychoanalysis introduces us to unconscious impulses (1935, p. 16). Memes, one might argue, introduce us, or rather, inundate us with visions of unconscious wishes, desires, resentments, fears, anxieties, etc. The digital field is a playground for the unconscious. There is little to no superegoic censorship in the experience of browsing. The

internet is an endless realm of unconscious provocation and exploration. As Marcuse examined, within the conditions of consumer capitalism, social order is carried out not through coercion but through seduction. Likewise, the digital social factory operates not through force, but through constructed dependency *vis-a-vis* seduction.

Digital fields seduce the unconscious. Cyberpsychologist, John Suler has identified factors such as, dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority, that produce what he terms the "online disinhibition effect" (2004). Naturally, these factors do away with the so-called superegoic function, allowing the subject to discard the reality principle and sink into the undifferentiated "we" that does not really exist. This may resemble the ironic feature of belief wherein the I does not *really* believe (in the proposed extremist vision) but it remains valid to passively believe because *someone else* really does. The social dynamics of this ideoscape produce a sort of interpassivity. When we are interpassive, according to Žižek, something else, a fetish object, is active in our stead so that while you think you are active, your true position is passive (1997). Interpassivity affords a type of sedative experience, it is an instance of fetishistic disavowal aimed at countering the hyperatomized social real that is devoid of trust and reciprocity and thus, rife with anxiety (Burnham, 2018, p. 51). At the same time, interpassivity produces an image of individuality and visceral affect through dissidence: the feeling of knowing things that nobody else knows, or at least, saying the things that nobody will say, it is a way of transferring our jouissance onto a digital interface to shield ourselves from the violence of truth and desire (*ibid*., p. p. 51).

The meme economy adopts the dimensions of the human condition that have historically remained fixed in the private sphere and extends their idiosyncratic quality to populate much of the online world. In the face of this, all becomes banal, nothing shocks, and if it does, it is not for more than eight seconds. The social or ideological elements inscribed in each representation do not necessarily register consciously, but rather, inform and mirror channels of the unconscious.

3.14. Personality as Brand

Online, to be the subject that says what should not be said, has become a specific and contagious stylization of the self. For this particular subject, nothing merits desire or interest and their technique both extinguishes and enhances ambiguity in worlds both internal and external. This depressive, apathetic or nihilistic stance is contagious. Byung-Chul Han delineates the West's transition from what he terms a 'disciplinary society' to an 'achievement society' (2016). Post-transition, it becomes apparent that the subject of the latter ruthlessly turns against himself, exhausted and disgusted with having to become himself. This transition can be understood as the collective movement from a superego installing manifold "should-nots" to a permissive superego (disguised as the absence of one), informed by neoliberal ideology, suddenly demanding innumerable "shoulds and cans" – demanding enjoyment. Han sees that late capitalist society no longer corresponds to a Foucauldian "disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks and factories" but has been replaced by a new regime, namely, a "society of fitness, studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories" (2016, p. 8). This new model does not manufacture "obedience-subjects" but instead, "achievement-subjects: entrepreneurs of themselves" (*ibid*., p. 8).

The opposition between achievement and obedience subjects can be problematized, however. Consider Weber's Puritan subject. The Calvinist dimensions to Weber's study of the Protestant ethic resembles the achievement paradigm operating in neoliberal ideology while the ascetic aspects of Puritan morality contribute to this subject's tendency toward obedience. This discloses the ambivalent structure endemic to capitalist subjectivity – enhanced by contemporary society's preoccupation with the imaginary. Achieving can look no different than obedience when the success is reduced to one-dimensional celebrations of profit and significations that imply wealth. While the hypercommodification of the subject under conditions of communicative capitalism may appear as aesthetic and expressive freedom in a permissive society, the limits of this freedom, contingent on the capitalist mode of production, dictate that true freedom to self-determination remains unavailable – generating economic obedience in a culture obsessed with the signification of achievement. Here, we can witness the Real of power relations

breaking apart the dualism between the symbolic law of obedience and imaginary conditions of achievement.

Entangled with the production of subjectivity, the metaspectacle seems to capture the subject within the totality of "commodity reworlding", to use Donna Haraway's phrase. The self as brand configures as a result of this new capacity for self-representation merges into the constant stream of advertising in which distinctions between object and subject dissolve in response to the logic of commodification. We approach a state of representation wherein commodification breaches the essence of our cultural psyche. We can relate this process to a form of cultural parasitism that Merton identified. Cultural parasitism is that which is transmitted through means of the manipulation of human awareness and by which it reproduces itself as cultural information into other minds. This interacts with economic parasitism in which profit is extracted from all human transaction and becomes the basis of all human action. While the possibility for self-creation via the mode of constructing a 'personal brand' may release the individual ego into a zone of freedom *vis-a-vis* his commodification, ultimately, these relations are organized on the basis of projections that ultimately alienate him from authentic intersubjective experience (2016, p. 52). These sublimations, upon inspection, are instead non-repressive desublimations.

The spectacle is not merely a collection of images, it is a social relation among people, mediated by images (Debord, 1967, No. 4). The metaspectacle is an attempt to resymbolize experience by inviting material from the unconscious, which contains that which we don't know we know, to populate the conscious terrain of the imaginary. But in this process, the subject adopts a nihilist stance in the face of his diminishment corresponding to his overwhelming immersion in the hyperreal. The overflow, what cannot be integrated into the 'achievement paradigm,' gets expressed in absurdist and obscene memes that advance a misanthropic and apocalyptic vision for society.

Memes are digital yet local creations. The social knowledge required of the subject to understand and engage with a meme limits access to the cultural logic of its specific subcultural arena – generating an exclusivity that can bolster an imagined sense of belonging for those who *do* understand. The libidinal dimension of this phenomenon makes it a primary example for the ways in which simulated cultural environments, operating through image-based propaganda, can more or less alter the ontological structure of the

subject. Encountering these images, the subject experiences his attention seduced to a fantasy that activates the drives, erotic and destructive. But part of what colors the addictive and cathartic nature of simulacra-exchange and distribution is the inherent nihilism memes accommodate, invoke and validate as they are taken up by a social self.

3.15. Disaffection, Desublimation and Irony

Desublimated resentment can look a lot like irony, which as Richard Rorty explains, is a condition of doubt regarding the "final vocabulary" through which human beings justify their beliefs and lives (1995, p. 101). The ironist undermines the master signifiers that 'common sense' takes for granted and because of this, exists in a position that is "meta-stable" – never quite able to take themselves seriously because they're always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change" (*ibid*., p. 101). To be aware of the contingency and historicity of meaning (and of language) is of course, crucial, however, the ironist develops a dizzying sense of instability with regards to identity – it is an imaginary identity opposed to the symbolic order after all. The ironist, Rorty writes, "spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught the wrong language game" (*ibid*., p. 102). A sense of rootlessness in the absence of universal truths and absolutes pervades the ironist and, in this way, the ironist is the subject of the metaspectacle *par excellence*. Hence the 'irony-bro' archetype emerging in digital subcultures between 2016-2018. The ironist is a deterritorialized and postmodern subject, the meme maker is the ironist in the process of exorcising his doubt – the contents of which can receive social recognition which confirms reality as it is felt – with uncertainty and fatalism.

This uncertainty and fatalism is taken up by several significant social and political virtual communities, all dealing in competing metaspectacles and all reacting to psychosocial short-circuits in their own way. The use of irony and absurdism is cathartic, no doubt, but the 'tribalism' that organizes online discourse – colliding symbolic orders manifest in metaspectacular form – has begun to distort their potential to productively mediate postmodern conditions. The tendency towards extremism, given the nature of unconscious dynamics online, has grasped the libidinal circuitry of many disaffected young

people and captured many in the endless antagonism of what is being called a 'culture war' – this tendency being the subject of the fourth and final chapter.

Chapter 4.   Politics as Therapy: Politicized Nostalgia and Politicized Melancholia: The 4Chan Right and the Identitarian Left

All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war.

Water Benjamin, 1935, p.19

Crises of attention, desublimation, and the very existence of the metaspectacle are instantiated by the collapse of the big Other – a loss of authority and the jolt to resurrect its meaning. A sense of political impotence operative at the level of real material change is reacted to with cultural virility – replaced by the potency generated by controlling the narrative. This chapter will delineate exactly what the collapse of the big Other represents, specifically with regards to communication and demonstrate, using two case studies, how it is reacted to by examining cultural symptoms.

4.1.   Ontological Insecurity, Discursive Chaos

The big Other makes language and all its emergent intersubjective textures possible. The big Other represents the principle of arbitration, it holds the 'rules of the game', organizes communication and sanctions meaning (Hook, 2018). The collapse of the big Other generates conditions where it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals and groups to talk to one another. As higher orders of meaning – theistic doctrines, institutional realities, metaphysical totalities – fray in the deconstructive mood of postmodernity, so do the languages used to describe them.[40] The disassembling of the big Other unleashes a kind

---

[40] Certainly this is not the first moment in history characterized by symbolic collisions – theistic doctrines and other higher orders of meaning existed in tension or even conflict with one another across cultures and time. Arguably, these conflicts become a motivational force for the unfolding of history. However, the speculative deconstructive tendencies of postmodernity, in conjunction with the communicative power central to an information society, brings with it a new phenomenology of these conflicts. The visual medium of digitality and its immediacy democratize the production of structures that organize belief. While those in the second century BCE might have experienced epistemic chaos in the face of competing religious authorities, people in the twenty first century are confronted with scientific, ideological, religious, subcultural, etc. forms of belief – all of which can be cast under suspicion with a few clicks by one another. This is a kind of decentralization of authority – the big Other has been fragmented and appropriated in so

of discursive chaos on pluralistic, post-industrial societies. There is little that can be agreed upon when the operative symbolic orders from which language is drawn are many and mostly incommensurate with one another. Thus, we speak, in constant tension, unsure of whether or not we are being understood, whether our references will land, whether our vocabularies can map onto one another, and without the assurance that anyone can speak the same language at all.

The big Other grounds ontological and linguistic realities so, with deterritorialization, we lose common ground, common sense, common realities. The response to this kind of loss takes the form of reterritorialization – most of which is carried out by the culture industry at large. But the culture industry *vis a vis* the internet, as the medium of postmodernity, is far more decentralized than its previous iterations, hence the concurrent populisms on the right and the left now that media is more or less democratized.[41] The 'prosumer' model that Jodi Dean describes produces a kind of dispersion of cultural authority – culture-makers, although still often informed by the mainstream, are not confined to institutional credibility (2009). Because of this, reterritorializations taking place online – efforts to recast meaning in some light: fanfiction, forum communities, social media groups etc. – are delocalized and take place sporadically. New languages develop in the gaps left by a deterritorialized social field. But this process entails a kind of linguistic chaos; there is no way to square a discourse from one corner of the internet with another, there is no shared set of beliefs, there are no fundamental ontological principles to tie these various reterritorializations together. When this kind of cultural excess filters into the realm of politics, methods to reterritorialize the failing symbolic field start to collide into one another, they start to clash and ignite what is being called a 'culture war'.

---

many directions that the possibility of totalization is foreclosed, leaving the subject abandoned to the forces of social pressure, economic coercion and linguistic persuasion.

[41] Clearly the internet is still privatized and controlled by the corporations that host the platforms we exchange, produce and consume on. The internet, like the television companies preceding it, is organized by monopoly capitalism but the prosumer model of the internet lends it towards an entirely new media environment. Jodi Dean discusses the implications of these trends in *'Reformatting Politics: Information Technology and Global Civil Society'* (2006.)

4.2. Symbolic Collisions: To Gaze Backwards or Forwards

The symbolic becomes the ground which seeds a 'culture war'[42] where the compulsion to demonize and tear down an old symbolic order lies in opposition to the compulsion to idealize and revert back to it in a time when the process of deterritorialization carried out by fluctuating speculative markets of capital is met with reactionary reterritorizations that gaze backwards, toward a past before neoliberal deregulation, rather than forward. These reterritorializations are entrenched in what Mark Fisher deems 'capitalist realism', choosing to articulate the social world – frustrations and malaise constitutive of late capitalism – in terms of cultural, rather than economic, critique.

Culture, taking psychic precedence over politics, has become a field of contestation where symbolic conflicts register visibly, in imaginary forms. In light of this, the proverbial 'culture wars' can be understood as the site where neoliberal austerity, metaspectacular media, attentional-fatigue and declining symbolic efficiency coalesce to produce a highly contentious and often violent discursive environment. The economic basis for experiences of precarity, isolation and powerlessness are invisibilized insofar as capitalism, as a mode of human relations, is reified and therefore naturalized in a neoliberal stage of late capitalism. To some extent, unrest at the level of the symbolic (coded in the social) indicates (perhaps an unconscious) rejection of capitalist exploitation, ceaseless competition and precarity; however, the energy of this dissatisfaction is channeled into cultural assemblages that rarely pierce the veil of capitalist social relations in their articulation of the 'problem', defaulting back to scapegoating the cultural 'other' rather than the 'other' of class (the bourgeoisie). This is because culture is a.) less fixed than a capitalist mode of production and therefore subject to constant fluctuation, and b.) more visible in the terrain of the entertainment matrix so shifts are more easily identifiable. The cultural reterritorializations that get produced exist as spontaneous affirmations of fading sociosymbolic principles, as collective 'scripts' or get shaped into 'ideological coordinates'

---

[42] The term culture war, according to Žižek, is a class war in a displaced mode. This insight will become important in establishing the symbolic materiality of class as well as realizing transitional potential for the left in breaking through the imaginary into the realm of the symbolic (the body, the unconscious) in order to truly grapple with the politics of class again.

which are subject to a specific organizations of character set by the 'culture industry' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944).[43]

Spectacle-consciousness has absorbed the political and recast its function as adjacent to or in addition to cultural difference. Because of this, representation – that which emanates from the register of the imaginary – dominates and 'identity politics' become the politics most potent and enthralling in both digital and real discursive sites. The decline of the symbolic has left space for images and affects to flow freely, without resistance from universal principles and moral systems derived from the *Name-of-the-Father*. In these conditions, there is the possibility for many languages and many symbolic reterritorializations to attempt to recode the lost structures of interpellation. The culture wars unfolding in the age of identity politics are produced by a compulsion to resymbolize, to infuse language with symbolic meaning, to define oneself through the negation of who one is not. Language, as we have witnessed with the more obvious forms of identity politics, white nationalists and the 'social justice warrior', has gained a heightened significance – saying the right thing or refusing to do so have become political determinations of identity.

4.3.   The Precariat and Imaginary Identification

Jodi Dean's observation that we have moved from a paradigm of symbolic identity to one of imaginary identity provides a framework for understanding how the structural precarity of neoliberal globalization and psychic insecurity of deterritorialization is reacted to and compensated for in the realm of culture. In his 2011 work *The Precariat* economist Guy Standing demonstrates how labour insecurity and insecure social income rob the

---

[43] While the experiential dimension of one's life might be dominated by material concerns – inability to pay one's rent/mortgage, bankruptcy, unpaid medical bills etc. – the system of representation overcodes these material concerns with cultural issues. This is not to say that, one level, the latter is felt more acutely and informs one's political orientation most directly, but rather to express the way in which the spectacle fails to integrate (ignores) pressing material concerns to direct attention (libido) toward fragmenting issues of culture. The persuasive and enthralling quality of today's spectacle-based cultural apparatus tends to overcode issues of political economy with issues of taste while still maintaining, to some degree, that these issues of taste are just as important, if not direct expressions of the material dimension of one's life. It is a distractive and fracturing mechanism.

precariat of a work-based identity (p. 12). The precariat, in this formation, is what Standing sees as a combination of elements derived from proletarian and precarious existence (2011, p. 6). This existence is characterized by a lack of community support, a lack of state and private benefits, no predictable salary or status, no chance to bargain/unionize, careerless jobs, feeling without tradition and social memory or a lack of belonging to an occupational community, and being without any "shadow of the future" to aspire to (2011, p. 12). In short, the precariat sees no future, has no binding relations, is alienated, anxious and anomic, plagued by insecurity materially and emotionally and experiences no upward mobility and, as Standing predicts, is constituted by 1/4 of the global adult population (2011, p. 24). Following the 2008 recession and the regime of temporary and part-time work that erupted in its wake, underemployment and unemployment, under the spell of neoliberal ideology are considered issues of individual failures of personal responsibility rather than understood as structural/economic failures (2011, p. 45).

Ultimately, these material insecurities translate into psychic distortions and social illness. Standing articulates that anger at the lack of mobility and blocked avenues to a meaningful life, anomie born of despair, anxiety at the possibility of losing one's dignity with a single mistake, alienation at knowing that "what one is doing is not for one's own purpose" in combination with the notion that one should be grateful for jobs and opportunity (precarious work) unleashes "dangerous" libidinal charges (2011, p. 20). Surely, the 'crisis of masculinity' is, in part, symptomatic of the transformation in working conditions, the feminization of labour, the growth of the service industry, downward mobility, the loss of occupational identities and the status they afford. Denying a growing class of people of their future, security and identity inevitably instills fears and frustrations that may be channeled toward the left or "extreme left" and lead to the precariat's "backing populist demagoguery" that play on these fears or phobias (2011, p. 4). Deterritorialization here is felt as an overwhelming absence of work-based identity or religious identity. Cultural identity, however, is still viable and available for groups to graft their desire for belonging and security onto. Thus, the dialectical tension energizing identity-based political currents, namely the alt-right and the identitarian left[44], can be viewed as two

---

[44] Although the use of the political binary, left and right, is broadly contested in the post-2016 U.S. election political discourse, namely because of the horseshoe-esque theory regarding Bernie Sanders supporters

manifestations of the same hysterical response to deterritorialized conditions: both seek symbolic associations.

4.4. The Necessity of Symbols and the Symptom: Jordan Peterson

Standing regards symbols as necessary components in "forging a class and building identity, fostering the basis for solidarity and *fraternité*" (2011, p. 3). The right derives its symbols from the past, while the left, refusing in its progressive spirit to gaze backward, struggles to attain a sense of the symbolic and therefore, struggles to achieve the level of political potency that the right in its populist resurgence seems to have the monopoly on. Canadian clinical psychologist, now media personality and bestselling author Jordan Peterson's popularity can be understood in relation to these shifts. His project rests on the process of resymbolizing the lives of disaffected young men. He emphatically insists on his role (in the culture war) lies in the dissemination of a message of 'responsibility' which has led to his prominence in the 'classical liberal' or 'right libertarian' political strains of Western youth. He explains that young 'Western' men are yearning for a kind of reinvigoration of meaning, and, through Jungian polemics, he expounds the virtues of meritocracy and the notion that, with increased responsibility, one achieves greater meaning in their life. Peterson has, in this way, harnessed a kind of lingering resentment left over in university campuses where liberal identity politics had taken hold of the university political discourse at large. In doing so, he has successfully instrumentalized the resentments of socially dispossessed young, typically White, men towards his own financial gain.[45] While extolling the virtue of responsibility Peterson swiftly inoculates his

---

voting for Donald Trump and the populist wave sweeping across the West, dissolving political divisions to some extent, this chapter will employ the binary. The revolutionary task, according to Deleuze and Guattari is to organize, once and for all, a "bipolarity of the social field" – cogs and saboteurs existing inside the single machine of capital." (2009, p. 255) Maintaining this bipolarity of cogs and saboteurs is incredibly important for solidifying an active class struggle—the neoliberals (who share most of their economic policy with neoconservatives), the traditional conservatives, the capitalists, all participate in a certain relation to capital––they are supporting and reproducing it uncritically. Progressives or "the left" should remain distinct for historical and strategic reasons; political revolution requires a clear delineation of who class enemies are and how they are to be resisted.

[45] Peterson has been earning an estimated \$80,000 a month in 2018—contributions from the some 9,500 of his fans on the membership service Patreon. Source: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/may/14/patreon-rise-jordan-peterson-online-membership

followers into a pro-market, traditionalist system of values. His base of followers will defend and support global capitalism with fervor, instructed by the humanist approach Peterson adopts when explaining that millions around the globe are lifted out of poverty each day as a product of capitalist innovation and technological advancement – ignoring the ever-increasing wealth gap inherent to capital's structure of distribution that slows this process down significantly. But he does not ignore this gap entirely. Rather, he rationalizes (and naturalizes) wealth inequality through an analysis based on what is called the 'Pareto Distribution'[46] – a convenient, semi-mythic statistical theory positing a kind of 80/20 rule wherein 20% of the population holds 80% of the wealth. Peterson exists as the embodiment of capitalist rationalization. He attempts to reterritorialize capitalism with a fantasy of its heroic prospects – a rearticulation of the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps", culturally reinscribed in the form of "clean your room!" He opts to interpret the world through a social Darwinist lens which appeals to disempowered young men insofar as it affirms a kind of natural order – it ontologizes hierarchy to defend the 'superiority' of men as 'strong, rational, provider' figures destined and deserving of authority. For Erich Fromm, social Darwinism is a projection of one's own internal sadism onto all of nature (1965, p. 252). Certainly, a sense of atomization and resentment, perhaps even sadism – a short-circuited aggressive tendency – is palpable in Peterson's fanbase. His declaration that "the new counterculture is to be useful" is a way of validating social Darwinist and also capitalist principles regarding the value of certain vocations and lifestyles.

We can read Peterson's popularity as symptomatic of declining symbolic efficiency. His call to young men to 'rescue your dead father from the underworld'[47] is understood by his followers as an incitement to salvage what remains of 'Western culture' so that one can feel equipped, philosophically and psychically, to rescue oneself from the pitfalls of hedonism, laziness, and other forces of anti-production. Peterson himself can be understood as a father figure within particular fatalistic, hyperalienated virtual communities. His combination of self-help ethos and reactionary political aura is unfortunate. We might speculate that his sermon on responsibility and self-improvement

---

[46] Video: "Jordan Peterson—The Pareto Distribution" Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcEWRykSgwE

[47] Video: "Save your father/tradition from that bloody whale-Dr. Jordan Peterson." Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0Twmzjo_Sw

initially attracts fans, perhaps even saving some from the nihilistic philosophies of the incel and 'black pill' communities, but his validation of conservative and often bigoted dispositions is ultimately what keeps them there. Peterson has generated a kind of cult of personality, those who adopt to his presuppositions tend to defend him in every direction possible – his *imagos* has replaced, to some extent, the absent or insufficient father *imagos* of his followers (1935, p. 11). Peterson's hysteria regarding the decline of an authoritative patriarchal order maps well onto Lacan's theoretical speculations on this point.

Peterson and his followers yearn for totalization, so, through Jungian psychoanalysis[48], narratives of meritocracy, and a mystification regarding the 'Western values' installed from ancient Greece to the Enlightenment, an essentialist fantasy of natural order projected and administered as an antidote to 'postmodern neomarxist' chaos. This is ironic considering the position Peterson adopts towards totalitarianism – his vocation, he announces time and time again, has always been in service of understanding how human beings can manifest the absolute violence central to totalitarian regimes. He explains that the majority of his early 20s were spent perplexed with the problem of 'evil' operative in the Holocaust and Soviet Russia and the desire to understand the psychological mechanisms that allow such catastrophes. This, Peterson is clear, is precisely why he is preoccupied with the issue of transgender pronouns and policing of language, which he sees, hyperbolically, as cultural maneuvers that flirt with authoritarianism reminiscent of the Soviet era. What is most ironic is that, in his refusal to adopt transgender pronouns into his vocabulary, he mobilizes a reactionary defense that invokes a traditionalism which contains contours of the very totalitarianism he rejects. All of this reveals Peterson's true motives: to trade one form of cultural hegemony for another. We can also read Peterson as a savvy businessman, who opportunistically capitalized on a moment of ideological and discursive chaos related to the ascendant 'social justice warrior' politics on college campuses. The absence of white male representation left a void in the rights discourse unfolding at this crucial time, between 2014-2017, so Peterson, with his impassioned speech, his sermons on responsibility and his critique of 'victimhood politics', harnessed the resentment brewing at the peripheries and generated a new, yet very old way of

---

[48] Erich Fromm argues in his *'Psychoanalysis and Religion'* (1950) that the Jungian theoretical framework operates on the substructure of an authoritarian model of religion, namely Protestarian theology.

interpreting the cultural antagonisms of the moment. In all of this, a strange yet libidinally attractive sense of nostalgia circulates through Peterson's discourse, placing him in close proximity with strains of the ethnonationalist narratives promoted in the alt-right.

4.5. Nostalgia and Other Fetishized Repetitions

The right's impulse to gaze backward in the face of devastating neoliberal austerity and poverty has attracted considerable libidinal investments from the white working class. Without the political imagination and will to sow new structures of social reality, the right captures resentments effectively by presenting nostalgic impressions as compensation for the symbolic misery of today. The neoliberal order has "increased both economic insecurity and cultural anxiety with expansions in the sphere of negative market freedoms" while simultaneously disintegrating or neglecting to maintain institutions "in and through which people could control or determine their own destinies (that is, positive freedom)" (Gandesha, 2018, p. 13). The right articulates this sense, reductively and with nostalgia: "Make America Great Again". We can speculate that to some extent, in recent decades, the political center has shifted further to the right while cultural and social norms have shifted toward the left. Effectively, the "roll-back of formal and informal networks of solidarity and social security" is met with attempts to assert reactionary (exclusive) authoritarian networks but also, with creative attempts to construct new (inclusive) modes of relating to man, nature and oneself that run counter to the reifying logic central to capitalist calculative reason, (for example, DIY, anarchist, punk subcultures) (*ibid*., p. 13).

This is to say that the decline of symbolic efficiency bears potentialities for both polarities: creative self-becoming (Nietzsche, 1887) and repressive desublimation (and therefore regression) (Marcuse, 1964). Coping mechanisms developed in the absence of a stabilizing master signifier are naturally, in a repressive, desublimated mode of society, reactive. For example, sects of the contemporary left seem to stagnate in preoccupation with the imaginary, stuck in the realm of the gaze, while factions in the right, particularly the millennial majority alt-right attempt to *resurrect a previous symbolic mode*, one that has been lost or overcome, reshaping its features into an idealized, hyper-traditional,

mythical Western prehistorical order. Both are destructive. By puncturing the register of the symbolic with these appeals to mythology, nationality etc., the alt-right however, taps into the ego libido, the body, and unconscious, harnessing the energy it takes to make the transition from online momentum to embodied political agitation as evidenced by the deadly 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2018.[49] The liberal left on the other hand has become most visible in the realm of identity politics, fixating on issues of recognition that absorb attention, create performative political scripts and demand scapegoats. This approach seems to paralyze political organization as fragmentation breeds habitual moral indignation. However, these tendencies, on the right and the left, are always adapting to one another dialectically. For example, responding to the left's identification with the status of the victim, members of the right can be observed adopting this status as their own[50], playing into the game of the *imaginary* gaze, appearing with duct tape placed symbolically over their mouths in a dramatic promotional video for their 'Day of Freedom' rally, held in London May 2018 to protest members of the alt-right being "silenced" by having their Twitter accounts suspended.[51]

In his seminal text, *'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'* Fredric Jameson anticipates a postmodern cultural scene where "pastiche and revivalism" dominate as a consequence of the foreclosed future it was responding to (1991; Fisher, 2009, p. 7). This nostalgic mode relies upon imitations stacked on imitations, which, if we survey cultural production today, is reaching a limit of absurd reflexivity. Antiquated models and forms of narrative are deconstructed from every angle, leaving the dimension of the meta as the last retreat for novel encounters. The techniques, aided by developments in technology, of cultural forms are changing, yes, but the content, much like the base of the economic structure, is left untouched. After consuming so much of the same for so long that culturally, we've made familiarity and its resurrection a fetish – we fetishize repetition

---

[49] On August 12, 2018 American white nationalists held a rally in Charlottesville Virginia under the title 'Unite the Right'—making the leap from online anonymous forums to the street. A woman was killed and dozens were injured after James Field ran his car into a group of counter-protesters. Source: *Huffington Post.* https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/richard-preston-arrested-shooting-gun-charlottesville-rally_us_59a20a39e4b06d67e3380e37

[50] Authoritarian aggressors who pose as victims is certainly not a new phenomenon. Consider the Nazis *vis-a-vis* Versailles and more recently, Trump's portrayal of the U.S. as a victim of NATO.

[51] See: Day of Freedom Promo for the Free Speech March on May 6, 2018. Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NFWP_TcCRU

and call it nostalgia. This is emblematic of the struggle between forces of deterritorialization and reterritorialization constitutive of capitalism. The cling to nostalgic media can be interpreted as a compensatory assemblage of bread and circus in the age of abject precarity. The desire for remakes, endless sequels, longing for previous eras of 'prosperity' and other forms of aesthetic nostalgia occurs at precisely the moment when economic and personal insecurity introduced market instability are reaching a historical peak. These are the dynamics that constitute the nostalgia-industrial-complex.

Consider the way in which, every couple years, a new *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* sequel or spin off is released and fawned over and that, six of the biggest blockbusters released in 2018 were superhero movies – many of which are sequels, and that, *Mary Poppins Returns, Christopher Robin* (a live-action Winnie the Pooh reboot), and a Mr. Rodger's tribute, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* all garnered significant praise over the course of the year. This arguably demonstrates that, not only does culture embrace nostalgic media, but also that it accepts collective regression to objects of childhood obsession. The celebration of infantilizing and regressive media (security) compensates for the abject precarity imposed by economic austerity (insecurity.) Two-thousand and nineteen has consumers awaiting reboots of *The Twilight Zone, The Lion King, DUMBO, Aladdin,* and *The Addams Family* – childhood favorites elevated to CGI cinematic masterpiece. While original narratives are still produced and acknowledged, nothing quite competes with the level of fanaticism central to the popularity of nostalgic reboots – recasting the treasures of the past through new technological displays seems a sure way to capture audience anticipation and attention. The insulating warmth received from nostalgic media shields, or at the very least, distracts, from both the awareness that novelty is hard to come by and that economic conditions are dismal – a true return to the golden age of capital (or childhood) is, at this point, structurally impossible.

4.6. Jameson's Paradox of Change

Jameson discerns that the "paradox from which we must set forth is the equivalence between the unparalleled rate of change on all levels of social life and an unparalleled standardization of everything – feelings along with consumer goods, language along with

built space" – "everything submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image, that nothing can change any longer" (1994, p. 15, 18). This is what Fisher conceived in his analysis of postmodernism as a memory disorder. Fisher connects a general inability to store new memories (remember, Stiegler's "cognitive overflow syndrome) to a hostility to that which is new and thus, perceived to be "un-navigable" and therefore, an attraction to "the security of the old" (2009, p. 60; 2010, p. 98). He concludes by stating that this very inability to make new memories may be the most succinct formulation of the "postmodern impasse" (*ibid*., p. 60). Nostalgia, a form of avoidance of the new and escape into the old, when activated politically, however, takes on dangerous currents and produces a kind of psychic and libidinal glue with an exceptionally violent force.

4.7.   Torn between the Despot or the Schizo

In *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari claim that the social axiomatic of modern societies is torn in two directions: archaism and futurism (1983, p. 260). They theorize that we, as a social body, vacillate between two poles: the "paranoiac despotic sign" (the sign-signifier of the despot revived as a unit of code), inflicting reactionary paranoiac overcharges, in opposition to the "sign-figure of the schizo as a unit of decoded flux" asserting subterranean schizophrenic and revolutionary charges (*ibid*., p. 260). This constitutes the left // right political dialectic as it unfolds throughout history. For Deleuze and Guattari, the schizoid position is that of the revolutionary who breaks flows by creating new signs, new symbols – new social machines (1983, p. 180). The social axiomatic in modern societies is torn in two directions: archaism and futurism – archaism, they see, is precisely that which "nourishes modern fascism" by resuscitating and reintroducing old codes as an attempt at political and economic reterritorialization (*ibid*., p. 258). Because the schizoid scrambles the codes, it is the schizoid who can induce new meanings and engineer new modes of desiring – altering the social fabric in unconscious ways. The revolutionary charges of the schizo are met by reactionary overcharges on behalf of the master (or "despot") – one tries to preserve traditional modes of desiring and one introduces schisms that undermine, mock, invert, reveal and transform these patterns.

4.8.   Displaced Political Anxieties

The displacement of political anxieties into cultural ones sees that reactionary surges assume racist and xenophobic overtones, organizing the wish for economic security into a wish for "racial purity" – a trend that, as W.E.B. Du Bois (1998), Stuart Hall (2013), Haider (2018) skillfully demonstrate has been fracturing the working class on the basis of "racialized difference" since the late 1660s in the United States. Haider delineates the "watershed moment" that came in the wake of the Bacon Rebellion in 1676 where African and European laborers initiated an insurrectionary alliance, burning down the capital city of Jamestown and forcing the governor to flee (2018, p. 55). This glimmer of class solidarity posed an "existential threat" to the colonial ruling class, thus the possibility for an alliance amongst exploited peoples had to be disarmed (*ibid*., p. 55). Haider explains that it was in this spirit that 'whiteness' was born as a legal category after the ruling class decidedly avoided the demand of African slaves for their eventual freedom and land ownership and instead, by the 18th century, offered the Euro-American planter class a bargain with the laboring class along with social privileges or the "psychological compensation" Du Bois identified denied to African slaves (*ibid*., p. 55-56). In short, the colonial ruling class installed a new racial ideology to inoculate a system of stratification articulated on the cultural plane to deflect from the class stratification occurring at the level of economic exploitation. Today, nostalgic musings, whether expressed aesthetically in the 'dadcore' fashion trend, continuous rehashings of the same cultural scripts from decades prior, or in the alt-right demand for 'traditional values' to counter feminism and other social justice movements, exist as a container for the psychic debris incurred in a mood of heightened anxiety and despair, where the future is uncertain and when only the past can appear as a place of refuge. Between the "economization of political life" and a world in which all is "passed through the filter of the culture industry" the political in itself for itself is lost, thus, the psychic chaos that ensues can only be distributed and invested in destructive forms (Brown, 2015; Adorno 1944).

4.9.   Virtual Containers for Psychic Debris

The medium in which a vast majority of this destructive psychic energy is manifest is the digital medium. Nostalgic longing for a return to 1950's America on behalf of the far right materializes in a narrativized form within anonymous digital enclaves like 4chan message boards, Reddit forums, and Youtube channels. Digital social fields like these constitute what Deborah Cook sees as "pseudo-collectivities", promising ideological refuge for alienated, atomized and perhaps narcissistic subjects who perceive the conditions of their existence as unstable and perhaps even undertheorized (2011, p. 100). Activating pathological social bonds by tapping into what Adorno saw as the aggressive character of the narcissistic superego, online ideological spheres produce considerable affective contagion, piercing the unconscious or unprocessed conscious contents of social alienation (1951). For Adorno, late capitalist societies dispense with the mediating agencies of the ego and individuality that were fostered in the more competitive liberal phase of capitalism (1968, p. 95). This shift in the economic order, according to Adorno, cultivates the formation of weak and submissive egos, arresting differentiation by exploiting "the primitive core of the unconscious" (Adorno, 1968, p. 95, Cook, 2011, p. 99).

Renunciations and assertions of social prohibitions, common to technoculturally accelerating societies, impose an unstable social ontology on the ego, paralyzing its intrinsic potential to successfully self-differentiate. Reactively, the ego's "cognitive activity", ultimately performed in the interest of self-preservation, "has to be constantly reversed, and *self-awareness" is forgone in the "interest of self-preservation*" [emphasis mine] (Adorno, 1968, p. 87). There is, of course, no doubt that Western culture has undergone essential dynamic changes with regard to socioethical expectations, exerting new forces and withdrawing previous ones in the "achievement society" paradigm of today (Han, 2015, p. 9). For Marcuse, the "greater liberty" afforded by late capitalist social relations "involves a contraction, rather than extension and development of instinctual needs" working "*for* rather than against the status quo of general repression" (1964, p. 77). Again, this is what Marcuse means by repressive desublimation: replacing mediated with immediate gratification, which may, he suspects, be a "vital factor in the making of the authoritarian personality of our time" (*ibid*., p. 77).

4.10. Totalitarian Desire

Alienation from totalities of reason (and meaning) involves several successive narcissistic injuries for the individual. Without being ascribed stable qualities – status, limits, and roles inherent to symbolic identities – the subject is left pondering the boundaries between self and the other, man and nature, his relation to history and the ontological problem of existence. To escape the sharp edges of these questions he may take up many, flexible and ever-changing identities, slipping from master to master, grasping for anchors or meaning because, without an identifiable master, the subject cannot satisfy the desire of the Other of the Other – the big Other. These transitions, from master to master generates confusion – the unconscious is suspicious of the merits of each chosen master, and this suspicion manifests as anxiety but, as Lacan points out, where there is anxiety, there is desire (Seminar VIII).

In the absence of a master signifier the question of the desire of the Other becomes an amorphous web of anxious energy, apt conditions for the production of more anxiety and obsessional neurosis. "Neurosis is the outcome between the interest of self-preservation and the demands of the libido, a struggle which the ego has been victorious but at the price of severe suffering and renunciations."[52] It is from these renunciations that the conscience is born. Freud reminds us that renunciation only results in the formation of a substitute or surrogate, that we never give anything up, we only exchange (1907, p. 438). The anxiety contracted from living in this tension between libido and self-preservation produces a conscience, which, once programmed with theological scripts, now craves the sense of certainty and stability as these scripts are discarded or fall under the scrutinizing gaze of technocratic rationality.

To compensate for this loss, left and right totalitarian ideological formulations tell the subject who he is in relation to a whole, what to desire and how to express it, and, most importantly, *who is other*. Totalitarian ideologies are politically convenient and instrumental symbolic systems that offer certainty and obedience (Neumann, 1957). The urgency of the current political moment produces conditions in which reactionary views

---

[52] Handout: Jerry Zaslove (February 2, 2018). "What does Freud Mean by the 'Neurotic'? [Based on Section VI from Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents.*]

seem to introduce a new "subversive element." In *The Culture Industry,* Adorno points out that the Nationalist Socialists knew that broadcasting gave their cause stature just as the printing press gave way to the Reformation – history reminds us that novelty is a libidinal magnet—there can be no doubt that the alt-right is hyper-aware of the viral potential of memetic discourse (1991, p. 129).

4.11. The Libidinal Circuitry of Anonymity

Freud's group psychology is useful in deciphering the elements contributing to the libidinal circuitry of the alt-right's digital discourse. Freud characterizes the unconscious dynamics in anonymous groups by the emergent sense of invincible power and the dissolution of a sense of responsibility that manifests (1921, p. 4). In a group, the individual can discard the repressions of his unconscious instinctual impulses and use the ego to explore a kind of "contagious hypnotic order" (which regards kindness as a form of weakness) and absorb its deep aversion to innovations and advances and unbound respect for tradition (*ibid.*, p. 4, 7). Freud explains groups are lead almost exclusively by the unconscious, which begs the question of whether the unconscious is necessarily traditional (*ibid.*, p. 6). To answer this, we might speculate on the alt-right's engagement with the unconscious and the left's dismissal of it.

Historically, the left deals in knowledge, attending, at least in theory, to events and questions in the spirit of Enlightenment – a rational approach, employing dialectical reason. This tradition contradicts the alt-right's allegations that the left today is 'too emotional' and fixates only on affective politics – a sentiment exemplified by the platitude spoken by conservative talk radio host Ben Shapiro that 'facts don't care about your feelings.' However, recent populist strains on the right have mirrored this style of politics. In the field of politics, it is the right, with Trump's libidinal politics courting the fear and anxieties of American voters, that appears to have the monopoly on desire. The symbolic dimension of traditionalism and unconscious (or conscious) fantasies of ethnonationalism, the transgression of the alt-right and its adjacent incel community, all contributes to the libidinal hold the right has on populist desire. Right-wing politics have become intimately entangled with the affective mood of the nation, which is not difficult to do when the

opposition offers the kind of technocratic rationalism expressed by the centrist American Democratic Party. Nostalgia "sells" more effectively than liberal identity politics which promise little to nothing in the realm of genuine political transformation.

Part of the right's monopoly on desire is that, through prohibition, taboo, tradition and the like, its symbolic network harnesses the potency of meaning more effectively than the left. Where the left privileges freedom, the right defends meaning. Historically there is contradictory relation, even a trade-off, between "meaning" and "freedom." The past was rich in meaning but poor in freedom; modernity is rich in freedom but at the cost of meaning.[53] Since its origins with the French Revolution, the left has emphasized freedom, while the right, in figures such as Edmund Burke, the great critic of the French Revolution, embodies meaning and tradition. Today this opposition is more visible than ever.

In *Group Psychology* Freud realizes that groups "never thirst after truth, they demand illusions" and, without the employment of any critical faculty, a group "thinks in images" (1921, p. 7). Through images, the group thinks in feelings that are "always simple and exaggerated" – what might be considered the perfect recipe for memetic discourse. Groups, like memes, also afford anonymity. The primary mechanism forming anonymous groups online is identification, but this identification is complemented by a sense of anonymity. Memes are both reductive and hyperbolic, they stimulate with immediacy and generate no suspicion, only certainty and, because of this, bind groups libidinally (*ibid*., p. 7). Freud sees the most important result in group formation is the *intensification of affect*, which is produced in every member (*ibid*., p. 9). At the center of this affective network is the primeval father. The organizational element of groups is the paternal *imago*, the ideal of the primal father projected in an image of strength, honour, status etc. which stands in place of each members 'ego-ideal' through the process of identification (*ibid*., p. 31). The group is the revival of the primal horde, writes Freud, famously analyzing this structure in both the Church and the Army as exemplary iterations of a reactivation of libidinally potent father surrogate mechanisms. Identification becomes a regressive "substitute for a libidinal object-tie by means of introjection of the object into the libido" (*ibid*., p. 21). The hyperalienated alt-right and its incel adjacent sect lacks love-objects, they will tell you this

---

[53] See Max Weber's "Science as a Vocation," in particular, his commentary on Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych.*

before anything else, thus, achieving solace in the exaltation of Trump with his 'strong-man' persona and in the belonging accessed through mutual exchanges of cynicism and resentment (*ibid.*, p. 21).

Within minutes of peering into the hyper-active 'politically-incorrect' 4chan board, one sees the 'alt-right' narrative take shape. Anonymous posters decry the "decay" of Western civilization, citing relational, religious and familial breakdown and the ascendancy of money and profit as the "highest virtue" as symptoms of Western degeneration. Hinting at the acute social alienation they feel in these conditions, 'alt-right' participants do in fact identify symptoms of a dysfunctional neoliberal order but opt not to frame their plight in these terms. Rather than perceiving their access to sex barred by the increasing demands of a culture resting on and fetishizing capital and understanding their social impotence as structurally determined[54], some point toward what Althusser deems superstructural apparatus (culture) to locate a reason for their suffering, disregarding infrastructural roots – economic inequality[55] (1970). Narratives of meritocracy transform the reality of structural barriers and economic inequality into internalizations of personal failure, removing the infrastructural scope of precarity and leading residual tension to be directed toward cultural scapegoats: it is the return of the repressed (Standing, 2011, Lorey, 2015). This situation of politicized nostalgia, a longing for a time before the "end of history" when one income could satisfy the monetary demands of family life and confer power through the breadwinner role, exists as the epitome of Žižek's assertion that the culture war is actually a class war, with a displaced mode (2016). The alt-right displaces anxiety about economic insecurity with anxiety about cultural capital.[56]

---

[54] This situation is compounded by the concentration of sexual experience along a hypothetical 'sexual hierarchy' that many young men see as unjust. Both wealth and sexual capital are being concentrated into few and fewer hands with the disassembly of regulatory structures like the family, religion and cultural taboo/ethical/normative systems. Now, members on 4chan would attest, some men have sex with exceedingly high numbers of women while the majority of men are left 'without any'. Of course, they frequently blame women for this.

[55] Despite the useful conceptual imagery of Althusser's base/floors or infrastructure (economic base) and superstructure (politico-legal, ideological) model of society, Marx in Chapter I of Capital suggests that these two levels are less distinct, forming, obscuring and reinforcing one another.

[56] This is understandable given the way in which, in the era of the 'influencer', cultural capital morphs into economic capital with greater ease and frequency than ever before. With greater follower counts or increased 'influence', subjects gain access to social and economic resources. But the breadth of one's influence is often determined by imaginary elements – beauty being the most important –the cultural capital available to those who curate 'beautiful' profiles is seen by many as undeserved if not unjust.

In this schema, a world of constantly shifting social forces, Adorno sees the ego as aporetic, or "at a loss", regressing "toward what Freud called ego libido" (1968, p. 87). Regression to the ego libido directs energy in service of narcissistic pathologies wherein the reifying effects of the exchange principle imposed by capital on human sociality manifests as a "tendency to derive a sense of social identity from the display of symbols" (Cook, 2011, p. 99). The ego libido is a simmering thing that totalitarianism taps into. Online, in anonymous forums, full-fledged indulgence in the ego libido simulates *jouissance* in alt-right participants as they encounter pieces of their unconscious validated when they are depicted in already-made and distributed memetic images and discourse, exclusive to the extent that only in a state of ego libido could one fully embrace this distortionary and obscene rectification of the symbolic order without acute cognitive dissonance.

4.12. The 'Culture War': An Eternal Mirror Stage in the Age of the Victim

The tension that emerges in an era dominated by rights discourse where entitlements are contested, removed and granted at an accelerated cultural pace, is between the image and the symbolic. It is within the tension between these two that we find an increasing desire for representation as the victim in a sphere of competing symbolic orders. The 'cancelled' aspects of discourse (that which is not deemed politically correct) accumulate in anonymous forums like 4chan to produce alternative webs of signification which can afford subjects who feel themselves to be censored by political correctness with a sense of recognition. Here it is understood that feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial politics operate, in their most reduced form, as identitarian revenge politics: movements that aim at exposing and inverting power hierarchies by challenging traditional value systems. To the paranoid subject, these movements constitute a perceived threat to a symbolic order that has been built into consciousness through decades of institutional reinforcements that privilege white, male citizens. Recognition in these identitarian movements often functions in relation to the status of the victim. Sensing their exclusion from narratives of victimhood, white men suspect the denial of their own suffering and

seek an image with which their own victimhood can be represented and socially recognized. For Lacan, identification with the image is possible only in conjunction with the symbolic. Reconstructing the symbolic order of an idealized Western cultural history, grounded in notions of "Western Judeo" values, the 4chan subject places himself in relation to the symbolic as an individual and positions himself against a collection of entangled social groups who now question or critique the morality of such history. He then searches for a language with which the image can designate symbolic meaning outside of and against the rhetoric of 'progress'.

Naturally, the image of the victim is reserved for groups who have been historically erased, systematically disenfranchised, violently subjugated. The image is extended to their descendants who live through the echo of this oppression – although, as discussed earlier, the position of the victim has been famously deployed as a veil of justification for violence on behalf of an oppressor, an example being the Nazis in Weimar Germany, aggressors playing the victim. The symbolic networks of signification are varied by the intermingling of material and ideal forces: class, religion, ethnicity etc. The 'culture war' is a war over language, it is a symbolic war. Being actually victimized by regimes of economic austerity and its attendant reality of downward mobility, alienated white men cannot digest images of privilege projected onto them by the outrage-industrial-complex (mainstream media). *Vis a vis* whiteness, the subject is not permitted to identify with the image of the victim, an identity category that affords recognition and thus, perceives his alienation as a glitch in the symbolic order or perhaps even an intentionally invalidated experience. Thus, the white male subject construes his own image of victimhood, declaring women and minority groups his enemy. The movement is dialectical – subjugated people re-appropriate the violent categorizations imposed on them in search for cultural solidarity and power. Then, those responsible for imposing these categories experience envy for the victim's position of resilience and reclamation (and perhaps authenticity) and start to appropriate the techniques which were initially employed to overcome the violence enacted on their behalf. What occurs through these reterritorializations on behalf of victims is a traditionalist paranoia over the 'theft of jouissance' (or loss of power) and a subsequent series of collisions of alternate symbolic orders, cultural webs of signification, that do not and cannot always cohere.

Key to understanding the politics of victimhood, misogyny, racism, or any other repetitive hatred of difference is Miller's notion of the 'jouissance of the other' operative in creating resentments, envy and demonizations of the other. Following Lacan, Jacques-Alain Miller explains that it is precisely the way in which the other organizes his desire and obtains his jouissance that threatens the subject (1994, p. 79). Racism, Miller states, is founded on "what one imagines about the other's jouissance" and interprets as the way the other experiences jouissance (*ibid*., p. 79). Here, it is the other's proximity that exacerbates racism – antagonism is bred through the confrontation between two incompatible modes of enjoyment. "True intolerance", he writes, "is the intolerance of the other's jouissance" (*ibid*., p. 79). Today, with the digital elimination of distance, in a world of overproximity, resentment towards the other's mode of enjoyment is at the heart of all 'isms' – the mysterious jouissance animating the other's world is considered both alien and a threat to the habitual nature of the subject's own jouissance. Fredric Jameson claims it is the envy of the other's *jouissance* that lies at the heart of social life, defining envy through Thomas Aquinas as "sorrow for another's good"[57] (*ibid.*, p. 74). Consider the conservative narrative that characterizes mothers on welfare or opioid addicts as undeserving of state care and assistance. These characterizations rest on the notion that the other is being endowed with jouissance that they do not deserve – not unlike the way in which the alt-right first diminishes the status of the victim for marginalized groups seeking reparations (resentments re: affirmative action, for example), to later adopt this status as their own, modelling their enjoyment as victims after those whom they earlier dismissed. The problem of the jouissance of the other is also responsible for the antagonism between 'Chad' men and their incel counterparts – involuntarily celibate men resent the way in which both Chads and Staceys (read: conventionally attractive men and women) organize their enjoyment and proclaim that the excessive sexual success experienced by these groups is both unearned and degenerate. Incels adopt the subject position of the victim but, rather than place themselves within a historical narrative of oppression, which permits the possibility for social transformation of the conditions which lend to victimization, they

---

[57] It is important to note that Jameson sees a growing awareness of the theft of *jouissance* by the Other, as historically motivating class conflict and class struggle. (*ibid*., 74)

portray themselves as essentially and biologically inferior to Chads relative to the sexual economy, casting their plight as both inevitable and unjust, therefore, erasing their agency and responsibility – adopting the position of the victim. Again, white men, sensing themselves to be victimized by some sexual schematic, locate their suffering in the cultural field, ignoring the fundamental economic oppression that makes cultural conditions such as these nearly unbearable. The incel position presents as fatalistic mimicry of the victimhood discourse circulating online where the status of the victim affords some abstract form of power. Ultimately, it exists as a diversion from economic critique and as a container for swelling resentments, and semblance of belonging in the depotentiating machine of short-circuiting digital discourse.

The construction of the victim is a way for humanity to idealize itself and attempt to master contingency and completeness by organizing a universal response to suffering. Sensing his exclusion from victimhood narratives, the 4chan subject seeks to expose what is felt as an *inadequacy of language* and go on to develop a new language in anonymous collective spaces where subjects who experience similar invalidation work together to produce webs of signification to represent his own lifeworld. What we all seek, ethnonationalists included, is, at the very least, a semblance of belonging and what the alt-right anonymous white identitarians seem to be doing in spaces like 4chan, is ironically inverting the emerging web of signification produced by the identitarian left.[58] Jodi Dean highlights the way in which the right now speaks the language of the left, making it more difficult for the left to clearly state what it wants, effectively trapping the left in the realm of psychotic politics where words and ideals have lost their meaning (2009, p. 18). The 4chan right appropriates identitarian discourse by developing a discursive sphere that presents as both anarchic and structured, transgressive yet puritanical, unregulated while exclusive, both validating and humiliating – embodying all the contradictory energy of the unconscious and desire. This discursive sphere generates a sense of belonging that works to dissolve ontological isolation and ground ego-ideals in something social.

But the sense of belonging that participants in 4chan threads generate is not so sweet – posters are equally vicious toward others (outsiders) as they are toward those inside

---

[58] This idea follows from Angela Nagle's central thesis on the topic of 4chan political culture, detailed in her controversial 2017 book, '*Kill All Normies*'.

the forums (themselves.) They spew volatile, degrading and obscene insults toward one another – glorifying and sacralizing the spirit of 'banter'. There is undoubtedly *jouissance* in cruelty. Here, paranoid projections take flight – anyone who takes a comment too seriously or fails to adhere to the levels of extremity expected in such a space are exposed and denigrated. After several moments of observation, it becomes clear that, banter or not, participants on 4chan do not really *fear* each other, but rather, feel *nauseated* by one another. Nietzsche might describe these as men of *ressentiment* – those opting to perform righteous indignation over rational response (1887, p. 91). Resentful subjects revel in nihilism, they "enjoy being mistrustful and dwelling on wrongs and imagined slights", hypnotized in the hibernation they indulge by avoiding entrance into consciousness (Nietzsche, 1887, p. 97). Radical mistrust and dismissal of all sincerity carries anonymous participants into hypnotic feeling of nothingness – the serenity of death-drive flatness. Nothing shocks – interpreting everything as banal becomes a means with which one might reduce (ontological, ideological, informational, etc.) complexity. Here, like many digital fields, everything means nothing, and nothing means everything. Resigned fatalism can look a lot like victimization – both of which contribute to an austere form of stoical ataraxy.

Digital enclaves like 4chan become the primary sites for the ego to test its identity and its reality. Because of this, they become the primary sites through which the narcissistic struggles of the identitarian 'culture wars' unfold. These representational battles can be interpreted as both emancipatory and necessary but also, critiqued as a politics pivoting on the neoliberal commodification of the self, producing as social reality perpetually enveloped in an extended mirror-phase.[59] Observing the online theatricality of the identitarian 'culture wars', one can not help but speculate that in the conditions where recognition rests on the identity status 'victim', performative victimhood takes on currency value. Information is currency, attention is sold, victimhood is marketed and cultivating an awareness of victimhood through the spread of information is gold.[60]

---

[59] The Lacanian mirror phase describes an era of childhood development, between ages 2-4 years old, wherein the child formulates an ego by reality testing through attempts at recognition and moments of misrecognition in the response of the other (Lacan, 2004, p. 5).

[60] How many billions do tech CEOs like Mark Zuckerberg make in the production and circulation of data by digitally generating outrage through the concept of victimhood?

4.13. Compensatory Cultural Capital

From where did the politics of victimhood emerge? According to Jodi Dean, the "position of the victim grows out of a prominent strain of contemporary American politics, namely the rights discourse associated with movements for civil rights, women's rights, and the rights of sexual minorities" (2009, p. 5). Dean sees communicative capitalism's "consumerism, personalization, and therapeutization" as creating ideal "discursive habitats for the thriving of the victim identity" (*ibid.*, p. 6). Under the ever-complexifying and mystifying precarity of global capitalism, casting blame ascends over other modes of activism, like the imagining of alternatives to the neoliberal order that contemporary subjects find themselves produced and trapped within (*ibid.*, p. 5).

Anonymous forums like 4chan provide tenuous recognition based in ironic reconstruction of a nostalgic symbolic order and the co-constructive efforts on behalf of conspirators and commenters to trace the origins and fault lines of a victim identity. Women can now refuse unwanted sexual advances and at times, receive cultural support for this freedom. Prohibitions on speech demarcate what can and should not be said. The 'male privilege' men allegedly acquire throughout their life as men is felt to be false – a receding entitlement for which men feel they are paying the consequences despite (allegedly) rarely if ever consciously experiencing themselves as benefactors.

Late capitalism offers little by way of opportunity to oppose the state, yes, but what it does provide are individualized pathways of 'success' that mirror the intended function, principles and agenda of the state. An example of this diversion of energy would be the election of Barack Obama, America's first African American president who was praised by Democrats and the American black population for his alleged anti-war promises, even receiving the Nobel Peace prize in 2009, who, in reality expanded the three American overseas wars in 2009 to 8 ongoing conflicts by the end of his term in 2016.[61] The reception

---

[61] "These eight wars encompass the continuing conflict in Afghanistan; drone wars in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen; the anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria; and two advise-and-assist mission – one against Boko Haram, which is at least nominally affiliated with ISIS, in Cameroon, and another against Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda and nearby countries. That's more than double the countries that fit my definition of U.S. military involvement in January 2009, when it encompassed ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and an incipient drone war in Pakistan." Delman, E. (2016, March 16). Obama Promised to End

of such a fact as difficult to gauge as this, and information like it, evidently, seize the attention of 'activated' American liberals, young and old. Obama's expansion of the U.S. military budget and interventionist wars remains a blind spot within the cultural impulse towards idealization and nostalgia based on culturally-relevant representations of his role in global politics. And cultural expressions of praise for Obama are significantly more polarizing than condemnations of his aggression foreign policy. Those who did not share the same admiration for Obama as liberal Democrats, would be subject to suspicions of latent racism motivating the criticism, thus, it became easier to just go along with the new politics of cultural attitudes that attempt at merely binding together a polis socially, rather than confronting the real image of terror and complacency with brutal neoliberal strategies.

It is not surprising that at this moment where abstract cultural energy overrides energy asserted toward understanding policy and the distribution of material resources, neoliberal politicians can implement inhumane economic policies so long as the attention of the polis remains fixed on whether individuals in the media have used the correct words to describe the new piece of outrage-generating 'news'. In the stagnancy of material change, politics becomes a form of therapy, a vector through which groups can air their grievances. One might ask, if the media's insistence and provocation of a 'gender war' or 'race war' simply weaponizes the libidinal instinct to socially conform, identify in-group and out-group boundaries and the ego's insistence on recognition? Surely, a fearful and distracted polis is easier to manipulate and pacify than one who is egoically secure and politically informed.

4.14. Formulated Exclusions, False Inclusions

Initiation from childhood into adulthood is disorienting enough, but the added pressure of shifting tacit social rules and the rise of identity politics only adds fuel to the fire. Where does one find their voice when the identity of their 'group' has been deemed unworthy of opinion? It worth speculating on whether the left's uncritical acceptance of rapid-cycling concepts of acceptability for ideas and language are partially responsible for

America's Wars—Has He? Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/obama-doctrine-wars-numbers/474531/

the all-out rejection of moralization on behalf of the alt-right. The politics of leftist respectability rests on keeping up with the online left's expeditious repetition of language games, their embrace and repudiation of ideas and adoption of ideas one week that fully contradict claimed values from the week prior. In 'cancel culture', nobody can keep up, even leftists fail and fail – the spectre of being cancelled or called out breeds a fractured and anxious psychosocial politics and encourages silence more than anything.[62] Self-censorship is a sacrifice demanded by the frenzied, hysterical online left. Even leftists consistently fail to belong to the "left". Grievance and resentment in the face of this style of censorial politics are discharged in enclaves of the cultural psyche like 4chan.

Harnessing the affective power of the image, the memetic digital field activates contents of the unconscious, and maps them onto ideologically conscious material. The conscious experience of the other, crafted through the imaginary register of Like-I, fastens itself to the symbolically informed other by seducing the unconscious through semi-coherent ideological narrative. As identity ascends to psychopolitical primacy, the self-brand projected on social media platforms rests experimentally on the national, ethnic, gender or racial identity of the subject. What goes unnoticed in this orgiastic spectacle of accepted and excluded online self-brands is what Guy Debord pinpoints as the "unity of misery" (1967, p. 63). But hiding behind the multiplying spectacular oppositions, the "masks of total choice", remain latent but differently manifested forms of what Debord sees as the "same alienation" (*ibid.*, p. 63). Concealed in the commodity-exchange of digital identities is the class divisions on which the real unity that the capitalist mode of production rests.

4.15. Psychotic Discourses

Authoritarian logics function as attempts to instantiate a failing symbolic order. Networked information technologies end the isolating effect of an anomic ego disintegration by permitting the emergence of a "discourse of the psychotic" (Dean, 2009, p. 169). For Dean, a psychotic discourse reacts to the residual gaps in the symbolic order

---

[62] We can also read call-out-culture as an egoic defense against the guilt of economic privilege one might consciously or unconsciously experience as a privileged member of a relatively affluent society.

with "certainty, fear, distrust, and a permeating sense of meaning" (*ibid*., p. 169). As mainstream media is categorically empty and devoid of substance, alternative networked communications "format the terrain of battle between competing conceptions of the Real" (*ibid*., p. 173). The impulse to formulate an alternative narrative, one that has been effectively shut-out of mainstream consciousness is energetic and hyperproductive, populating online conspiracy forums with vast amounts of content. The phantasmagoria of heightened significance, distrust and certainty that circulates in both the discourse of the alt-right and its offshoot, a movement called 'men going their own way' (MGTOW[63]) serves as an attempt to negate the new hierarchy emerging post-identity politics by designating that one's 'truth' is precisely the truth that nobody will admit. Following Lacan, Dean understands that the hole to which the psychotic responds, is an absence in the 'commonly admitted discourse' – 'normal subjects' don't perceive this hole and claim that the symbolic order is indeed intact when the psychotic is certain it is not (*ibid*., p. 168). To deal with this, the psychotic covers the hole with an image (read: ideology) and despite the incommensurability of this image with consensus reality, the psychotic nevertheless positions himself in relation to it.

What the participants on 4chan attempt to do is ground an image of the Real that includes and emphasizes the elements which others tend to leave out. An example of this may be the fact that the US dollar, backed by a central banking system, controlled by a small select group of individuals becomes a narrativized as 'Jews running the global monetary system, organizing a New World Order'. The psychotic locates and zeros in on the lack in the common discourse, noticing particularly the lack in language that we normally overlook: the important narrative pieces we fail to include and the parts of experience that language cannot fully grasp, then fills the lack with delusions of certainty – an example of what Debord sees as "madness reappear[ing] in the very posture which

---

[63] MGTOW is a new phenomenon originating in alt-right forums where men who feel cheated, and disillusioned with the prospects of heterosexual romantic relations conspire to "go their own way" by abstaining from relationships with women altogether. This, I see, is a reaction to the perceived removal of entitlements (to women, their bodies and their labour) men in previous societies experienced in the real of dating, and a means to create the sensation that one is denying women of their new power in a 'feminist' West. I would wager the MGTOW movement may be a manifestation of what Nietzsche describes as the "ascetic ideal that springs from the protective and healing instincts of degenerating life." (1887, p. 88) He goes on to state that the adoption of such an ideal indicates a "partial physiological inhibition and exhaustion against the deepest instincts of life." (*ibid*., p. 88)

pretends to fight it" (*ibid.*, p. 169; 1967, No. 220). Most importantly, as Dean explains, the subject tries to prevent us from "repressing what we already know", reminding us of "the violence and irrationality" underlying the symbolic order, the way the law is sustained not by reason alone but also by the "force/violence of a tautological enunciation" (2009, p. 169). The alt-right sees sacrifice as central to Western tradition, they admit there is violence behind prosperity and oppose 'entitlement culture' in favour of a 'rights and responsibility' narrative. The irony here is that the majority of members of the alt-right would benefit from the 'entitlements' the left struggles toward.

The proliferation of psychotic discourses is a natural response to the postmodern condition wherein there is no universal metalanguage so reality splinters into an indeterminate number of metadiscourses, some of which are psychotic (Lyotard, 1969, p. 357). The basis for evaluation of knowledge has been wiped out as the linguistic fabric of reality ruptures and coalesces in accelerating rhythms, and competing alternatives fall into the "unreal unity" that Debord identifies (1967, No.72). The decline of symbolic efficiency resounds in the banalization and narcotizing spectacle of corporate media while also creating apt conditions for the flourishing of psychotic discourses.[64]

4.16. Identity Politics and its Pharmakological Dimensions

Liberal identity politics tend to coexist symbiotically with consumer capitalism and, undeniably, sustain both the branding and political campaigns of late capitalism. Jodi Dean sees identity politics operating in this way by offering to ideological consumers the "ease of political expression", the quick availability of the affective thrill of radicality' i.e. a third way to be politically active in an age of neoliberal democratic politics, alongside voting for representatives and giving money (2009, p. 35). And for the left, Dean sees this as a symptom of its fundamental problem today: that the left accepts capitalism (*ibid.*, p. 15). Furthermore, there is, as we see with the rapid splintering of the left into more and

---

[64] The left is not immune from participation in the psychotic nature of discourse. The advent of the 'social justice warrior' testifies to this with its ambiguous, shifting and contradictory ideological tenets, tolerance of neoliberalism and flirtation with a full-out rejection of free speech.

more subcultural, boundary policing, language fundamentalist sectarianism, (what the alt-right refers to as the "cannibalism of the left") an unwillingness to say "we" out of "reluctance to speak for another as well as unwillingness to signify or name a problem, to take it out of its immediate context and re-represent it as universal" (*ibid*., p. 15). Fear of universalization haunts leftist solidarity – it is precisely the fear of symbolization. Dean adopts Žižek's view that politicization entails raising the particular to the level of the universal, which the left tends to avoid and a technique consistently undertaken by the right where they instrumentalize a singular dogmatic truth with seductive quality that the left fails to replicate (often, for good reason) in its discourse.

This fear of universalization hinges on the unwillingness of the mainstream left to posit class as an identifiable, analytical category. Guy Standing's analysis of what he calls the 'precariat' – defined as a combination of qualities (labour insecurity, insecure social income, a lack of occupational status) applicable to both the proletariat and "precarious class" demonstrates that for many years, even following the 2008 economic crisis, discussions of class are considered taboo (2011, p. 6). The precariat's alienation compounded by limited trust and community support, lack of state and private benefits is channeled into populist rhetoric that focusses on cultural scapegoats, nearly submerging class analysis in social commentary. This submersion provokes elements of the Real, unrepresentable in the first place, to become erased, repressed and dismissed, existing in the unconscious...only to reemerge in the online imaginary once after it has undergone a transposition where markers of oppression are disclosed in purely cultural terms. The culture war takes care of all economic discussion: alt-right participants blame migrant labour for driving down wages left for 'Americans' while the liberal media elite virtue signal and ignore the entire dimension of class (see any major awards show, the performance of "woke" politics on behalf of millionaire celebrities, #metoo rallying behind the ultra-rich etc.)

The replacement of politics by culture can only exist in a desymbolized, desublimated and distracted milieu. In late 2018, the yellow vests movement in France – a massive populist political movement calling for economic justice and rejecting President Emmanuel Macron's austerity politics – had been more or less overshadowed in the Western liberal media news cycle by controversy surrounding the annual Victoria's Secret

Fashion for its failure to include plus size and transgender models on the runway. In the age of spectacle-consciousness and digitally mediated sociality, the imaginary overcodes the symbolic and Real dimensions of antagonism between the elites and the precariat class – the imaginary 'changes' occurring at the level of representation attempt to compensate for lacking structural changes and therefore must undermine class solidarity and divert attention to the pseudo-symbolic, semi-tribal cultural rifts occurring at the level of bread and circus. The "culture war" is a war of incommensurable symbolic orders, all asking: what of culture (and language) should be promoted, installed and preserved.

4.17. The Melancholic Logic of the Left

Alternatively, refusing to sustain the relics of a violent and oppressive history, the left abandons the symbolic order of yesterday but continues to struggle to install its replacement. This lag issues a kind of atmospheric melancholia, tangible in the interstices of cultural production and political organizing. Not the type for fatalism and wary of nostalgia, the left deals in the politics of trauma and identity. Necessarily these two aspects demand careful and restorative attention and engagement, however, the lost object, whether it be hope, the future, solidarity, etc. has encased the left in a kind of emotional paralysis which then translates into political paralysis, fracturing and the like. "Melancholy is loyal to the world of things", writes Wendy Brown in her essay "Resisting Left Melancholia" (1999). Historically, a significant part of what binds leftist circles is the development and use of language around shared trauma. Feminist consciousness raising exists to elucidate the collective political dimensions of the experiences that individual women carry with them and in doing so, raise the personal to the level of the political. This is an immensely powerful process of liberating the subject from individualized experiences of shame, guilt, repressed trauma and works in emancipatory ways to connect the dots of systematic oppression.

The transformative potential of this process cannot be overstated. However, the 'melancholic logic' that can begin to structure these spaces and colour their dynamics carries a certain irony. Brown discovers that the irony of melancholia is that the attachment

to the lost object winds up superseding any desire to recover/be unburdened by it (1999, p. 20). Crushed ideals leads to melancholia – the left's series of heartbreaks: failures of Marxism, socialism, left movements, electoral losses – all contribute to this sense. This is in part why the left refuses to attach itself to symbols or posit universals. These losses also include the loss of a viable alternative to the political economy of capitalism (submission to capitalist realism), the "loss of a unified analysis with labour and class as inviolable predicates of political analysis and mobilization" and the loss of a "moral-political vision to guide and sustain political work" (Brown, 1999, p. 22). In the absence of a political strategy and moral vision, Brown suggests that, lacking a truth of the social order, the left is "caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing" – answering to an insatiable superego demanding nothing short of perfection (*ibid.*, p. 26). We can interpret this depressive mood of guilt and self-flagellation as producing the kind of punitive social dynamics circulating online and informing identity politics. The mood of anxiety grasping the millennial and z generations is accentuated in a political environment where cultural capital is distributed through the policing of language and exaggerated by the always-lingering possibility of exile or exclusion from political tribes based on a digital slip-up or a living, witnessed mistake. Melancholic perfectionism negates class solidarity with its insistence on the reproduction of highly particularized forms of communication and linguistic coherence (slang, esoteric vernacular, jargon etc.)

The late Mark Fisher brilliantly captures the aura of political paralysis infecting leftist circles, blossoming in 2013 and reaching its height in 2016-2017, in his controversial essay titled "Exiting the Vampire Castle". In this essay Fisher deconstructs identitarian classifications and the "crippling self-consciousness' they produce in an effort to caution those organizing on the left to avoid such practices and salvage a sense of class solidarity. Fisher saw the practices of individualism and privatization central to neoliberal ideology as toxifying the identitarian left's notions of race, and gender and obfuscating their analysis of class. Fisher received a variety of reactions to this essay. Some felt relieved to have their anxieties about the left puritanical impulse articulated while others accused Fisher of class reductionism. In *Mistaken Identity,* Asad Haider skillfully addresses this kind of class reductionism by historically situating the necessity of such identitarian forms. However,

these two thinkers both aim toward a project of resymbolization for the left – a movement involving the reassertion of class politics, a rejection of moralizing individualism and an effort to re-establish a sense of solidarity between leftist factions is required to overcome the identitarian impasse it faces today (2013; 2018). Fisher explains that the "actual ruling class tends to propagate ideologies of individualism while acting as a class" while the identitarian left claims solidarity but continue to act as individuals (2013). This, he sees, is at the root of the left's political impotence. The desire to have identities recognized by a "bourgeoisie big Other" leaves left identitarians "isolated by the logic of solipsism", because, with eyes only for that which lacks in the language and projected morality of our fellow leftists, we are blinded to the identity of the ruling class and severed from any form of collective will (2013).

The ascendance, or rather, the reinvigoration of liberal identity politics can be understood as energized by Freud's logic of the return of the repressed. Wendy Brown cites Stuart Hall's idea that the left's failure stems from its "insistence on a materialism that refuses the importance of the subject and the subjective, the question of style and the problematic of language" (1999, p. 24). Hence the predominance of fracturing politics that hinge on aesthetics, identity politics based exclusively on differences in subjective experience, the elevation of language and its proper use to function as an indicator of one's identity, and compliance as the decisive element of establishing belonging to a group or a movement. One might even argue that issues of subjectivity, style and language have achieved a level of epistemic primacy in leftist political currents, transforming the previously staunch and often limited materialist gaze of leftists into an idealist cultural crusade. Of course, this process is dialectical – today we can observe a new insistence on materialist theory in strains of the 'dirtbag' left of the podcasting world and activists working for housing and food justice and even elevating issues of class to motivate electoral politics. In his nuanced and much-needed discussion of the history and function of identity politics Asad Haider reflects on left melancholia, stating that what is most needed to understand the rise of the far right is an explanation for the "decomposition and disorganization of the working class" (2018, p. 10). The disintegration and defeat of mass movements leaves the working class – arguably less identifiable considering the regime of

flexible labour and the conditions of the 'precariat' that Standing identifies – with little hope and without the symbolic resources to libidinally bind itself together (Brown, 1991).

Haider highlights that the original intention of identity politics – defined in 1977 by the Combahee River Collective, a group of black lesbian militants, as a mode of analysis devoted to deepening the understanding of the systems of gender, race and class as "interlocking" – falls away in its current manifestation (2018, p. 7). Just as Stiegler sees the ideals of the counterculture undergoing a kind of "recuperation-implementation" process to be integrated into and mobilized toward the aims of capital accumulation, the "progressive languages" of the new social movements of the time were appropriated by liberal politicians of the ruling class (Stiegler, 2014; Haider, 2018, p. 99). Haider, along with many others, documentarian Adam Curtis for example, cites Bill Clinton's presidency as the beginning of such a process. Clinton, who brought forth the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Crime Bill and the Welfare Reform Bill, constructed an image of cultural resonance, grafting the cultural language of progress, change and emancipation onto an administration that politically and economically disenfranchised already marginalized populations (*ibid*., p. 99). Hillary Clinton's presidential run in 2016 extended this approach further by instrumentalizing the cultural forms that liberal identity politics had made recognizable and hegemonic in order to deflect from her projected role in maintaining and supporting the imperialist and neoliberal base level structures that organize capital.

Identity politics are a response to a left that has historically paid insufficient attention to the problem of subjectivity. If progressive politics are going to contend with the reactionary and regressive libidinal magnetism of the right, their strategy must incorporate radical vulnerability, expression and acceptance – symbolic security nets. Identity politics in their current form *are an attempt* at generating this kind of momentum and inclusion of subjective difference and idealities. However, an undertherapeutized and hypersolicited population, one with limited access to mental health resources, healthy expressive outlets, non-alienated forms of work and relationships, is not equipped to enter into a radical politics of care and vulnerability. The return of the repressed is not limited to the right-wing reactionary nostalgia – repressed desires for recognition, for tribal exclusionary tactics, and for moral righteousness transform media-enhanced liberal

117

identity politics into a form of politicized therapy. Therapy for a culture as a whole is possible, but it involves a concerted effort on behalf of each individual to traverse the contents of their unconscious in order to avoid transmitting transference neuroses – projections, paranoias and phobias – into the public (political) sphere. The metaspectacle harnesses the desire for trauma therapy and ultimately dissolves the potential inherent to such a desire by assimilating trauma narratives into a sea of images. While completely legitimate in their original intentions (to protect marginalized people from the brunt of the oppressive mechanisms of culture,) calls for 'safe spaces', reductive social mechanisms like 'cancel culture' and the incessant policing of speech tend to operate counterproductively – short-circuiting the desire for solidarity and deepening antagonisms to a point where reaction rather than response dominates the political discourse.

The "populist impulse", Paul Gilroy speculates, is a "response to the crisis of representation" (1987, p. 29). The populism of the right is surely a violent manifestation of what Haider deems 'white identity politics' – a reactionary impulse infused with racist and xenophobic tendencies in response to pluralistic but also economically devastated social conditions – while the populism on the left, visible in the massive support for Democratic primary nominee Bernie Sanders, depicts a kind of glimmer of class solidarity – an assertion of working class identity in the reign of cultural politics that represents all forms of identity except class. Cultural nostalgia on the right and its thinly veiled forms of racist and sexist sentiment can be interrogated as symptomatic of the "crisis of representation" that Gilroy describes. The movements between white identity politics and the liberal forms that emphasize pluralism, are dialectical – the triumph of 'representational politics', accomplished in part by liberal identity politics operating from within the pervasive 'culture industry' has produced a kind of regime of visibility. The white nationalists are no longer hegemonically visible, they are not the exclusive subject, thus, they sense their diminished status as a narcissistic blow and react with white identity politics, offering political support to whomever will represent the anxiety and fear these conditions generate.

These problems operate at the level of the imaginary – and require, in response, a symbolic articulation of class conflict, rooted in historical consciousness and a robust, strategic left political programme. Guy Standing affirms that, despite their pharmakological nature, symbols are necessary in forging a class and building solidarity

118

(2011, p. 3). A move towards a politics that can give account for unconscious desires and their meaning for group dynamics must be made, a politics operating purely at the level of the imaginary, in virtual realms that short-circuit attention and reason, will lead to nothing beyond mere spectacle. To sustain itself, the left must contend with the symbolic and develop a mythos in the same capacity that the right has in order to speak to anxiety and precarity. To do this, it must seek therapy in therapy and politics in politics and demand a right to both. It must articulate a politics of desire and incorporate the unconscious and the body in its delineation of prospects for new modes of being and ideals for human relationships under a decentralized mode of production. The sublimation (or desublimation) of personal insecurities into political affinities leaves the roots (the psychic roots) underinvestigated.

Mark Fisher argues that to truly overcome the logic of individualism and privatization we require an analysis of the "social causation of mental illness" (2009). But this does not mean projecting elitism, exclusionary politics and personal vendettas into the realm of the politics; rather, it requires political programmes that address the roots of economic precarity, volatility and uncertainty and seek an explanation for how these material conditions alter the psychic substance of one's experience. Atomized individualism will get us nowhere – as Deleuze and Guattari say, desire is a problem for groups – to get where we want, we have to know what we want and be unafraid to ask for it. The left needs to articulate its desire and mobilize toward it.

Chapter 5.   Conclusion

The problem facing the left is a problem of desire – the left must openly grapple with the unconscious if it wants to remain vital. The schizophrenic and revolutionary charges that will emancipate working people from the drudgery of austere late capitalist survivalism cannot be policed through moralities that can only be described as the repressed returning to foreclose the future. As the saying goes, those who don't learn history are doomed to repeat it. To some extent, identitarian politics are the result of a left that cannot desire *beyond the imaginary* – a left that struggles for representational justice, but which fails to elevate political demands to the level of the universal or posit a symbolic dimension to their political and moral vision. By failing to develop symbols, the left remains psychically impotent – never quite piercing the realm of the unconscious where desiring-production engineers organic, social and linguistic elements that structure social systems. Symbols, write Deleuze and Guattari, are a "social machine", functioning as a desiring machine within a social machine – *symbols are containers for human desire*. (1983, p. 180). The problem with symbols is identical with their power: they are politically potent and morally ambivalent. Nazi involvement with the occult testifies to this notion. Part of what makes the left resistant to fascism is its insistence on rational mediations between knowledge, the signifier and the social. Because of this however, it resists the symbolic and fears the irrational, often morally ambiguous momentum of desire. Symbols, therefore, are *pharmakon*: both poison and cure for any political endeavor. The left protects itself from the exclusivity, violence and sublimity of the symbolic by surrendering its terrain to the right whose archaist politics effectively absorb decoded flows and mobilize desire. On the left, class has been profoundly absent from its identitarian rhetoric that has captivated digital audiences for the last five years. On the right, the MAGA hat, the "OK" hand gesture, Pepe the frog, etc. have become symbols of solidarity amongst racists, alt-right enthusiasts, Trump supporters, and the far-right in general. What symbol of solidarity mirrors this on the left? Because the left grapples seriously with the question of difference, it is dealt a significantly more difficult hand in the generation of such symbols. Still, as Guy Standing insists, symbols are necessary in the forging of a class identity and help groups traverse the passage from symbol to political programme (2011, p. 3).

If representational politics continue to leave out the dimension of class, they will fail to make this traversal. Part of what makes it difficult to represent class in the age of the spectacle and metaspectacle is that, since financialization and the subsequent induction of society into a credit-fueled consumerist simulation, the signifiers of wealth have become more accessible than actual material wealth for the downwardly mobile precariat class. In the spectacle, both virtual and non-virtual, you can adorn yourself with signs of social mobility – imaginary self-organization of the body, speech, persona to replicate capital – while living in abject precarity and experiencing declining social mobility. The consumer model and spectacle-consciousness make it difficult for class to register as a category of representational politics. Standing explains that the precariat is a "class-in-the-making", not yet a "class-for-itself" – it lacks symbols to build a materialist and psychopolitical conception of its identity (2011, p. 3). It is only once class is discussed in terms of its role in shaping desire, inducing madness, and understood for its impact on the body and unconscious – once it registers language as a profound compass in the project of organizing revolutionary charges – that the left will generate a libidinal politics tantalizing enough to compete with the populist message on the right. Here, "political and fleshy emancipation are one and the same; the god is Dionysus" (Brown, 1966, 225).

References

Adorno, T. (1991). *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture.* (Ed. J.M. Bernstein) New York: Routledge.

Adorno, T. Horkheimer, M. (1944). *The Dialectic of Enlightenment.* Stanford University Press.

Althusser, L. (1970). *Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. (B. Brewster Trans.) Monthly Review Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation.* (S.F. Glaser Trans.) Michigan: University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981)

Baudrillard, J. (1979). *De la seduction.* (Paris: Editions Galilee) (M. Poster Trans. 2001.) Stanford University Press.

Beckett, S. (2009). *Endgame.* London: Faber and Faber.

Benjamin, W. (1935). *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.* (Harry Zohn Trans.) New York: Schocken Books.

Brown, N. (1959). *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History.* New York: Random House.

Brown, N. (1966). *Love's Body.* Toronto: Random House.

Brown, W. (1999). *Resisting Left Melancholy.* Boundary 2, Vol. 26., No. 3. Duke University Press.

Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Cambridge: MIT Press, Zone Books.

Burnham, C. (2018). *Does the Internet Have an Unconscious?: Slavoj Žižek and Digital Culture.* London: Bloomsbury.

Cook, D. (2011). *Adorno on Nature.* New York: Routledge

Dardot P., Laval, C. (2017). *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. London: Verso.

Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism & Left Politics.* Duke University Press.

Dean, J. (2010). *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of the Drive*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Dean, J. (2012). *The Communist Horizon.* New York: Verso.

Dean, J. (2016). *Faces as Commons: The Secondary Visuality of Communicative Capitalism.* Openonline.org

Debord, G. (1983) *The Society of the Spectacl*e. Detroit: Black & Red.

Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* London: Penguin Books.

Derrida, J. (1970). *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.* Macksey & Donato Trans.

Durkheim, E. (1902). *Anomie and the Modern Division of Labour.* (G. Simpson Trans.) The Free Press.

Erikson, E. (1950). *Youth and American Identity.* Childhood and Society. W.W. Norton & Company Inc.

Fanon, F. (1952). *Black Skin White Masks.* New York: Grove Press.

Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: is there no alternative?* New York: Zero Books.

Fisher, M. (2013). *Exiting the Vampire Castle.* London: openDemocracy.net

Foucault, M. (1965). *Madness and Civilization: The History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* London: Random House.

Foucault, M. (1972). *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History, The Archaeology of Knowledge.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Freud, S. (1907). *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming.* (P. Gay Trans.) New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Freud, S. (1911). *Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning.* (P. Gay Trans.) New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Freud, S. (1919). *The Uncanny. (*First published Imago, Bd. V., 1919; reprinted in Sammlung, Fünfte Folge. [Translated by Alix Strachey].

Freud, S. (1919). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* (P. Gay Trans.) New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Freud, S. (1921). *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.* (J. Strachey Trans.) Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical Press.

Freud, S. (1930). *Civilization and its Discontents.* (P. Gay Trans.) New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape From Freedom.* New York: Farrar & Rinehart.

Fromm, E. (1950). *Psychoanalysis and Religion.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gandesha, S & Hartle, J. (2017). *The Spell of Capital: Reification and the Spectacle.* Amsterdam University Press.

Gandesha, S. (2018). *Identifying with the aggressor": From the authoritarian to neoliberal personality.* Wiley Constellations. John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Stanford University Press.

Gilroy, P. (1987). *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Grosz, E. (2013). *Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death.* Sexy Bodies. Taylor & Francis.

Haider, S. (2018). *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump.* London: Verso.

Han, B. (2012). *The Agony of Eros.* New Haven: MIT Press.

Han, B. (2015). *The Burnout Society.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Han, B. (2017). *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects.* (E. Butler Trans.) MIT Press.

Han, B. (2017). *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hardt, M., Negri, A. (2000). *Empire.* Harvard University Press. Cambridge: MA.

Harsin, J. (2015). *Regimes of Post-truth, Post-politics, and Attention Economies.* Communication, Culture & Critique.

Hayles, K. (2007). *Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes.* Profession.

Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Jameson, F. (1994). *The Seeds of Time.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Jameson, F. (2016). *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army.* New York: Verso.

Lacan, J. (1958). *Seminar VIII: The Foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father.* (C. Gallagher Trans.)

Lacan, J. (1963). *Seminar X: Anxiety.* (C. Gallagher Trans.)

Lacan, J. (1975). *Joyce the Symptom (Sinthome).* (C. Gallagher Trans.)

Lacan, J. (1976). *From the Unconscious to the Real.* (C. Gallagher Trans.)

Lacan, J. (2006). *Écrits.* (B. Fink Trans). New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

Lasch, C. (1979). *The Culture of Narcissism.* New York: Warner Books.

Laing, R.D. (1960). *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness.* Penguin Books.

Lemert, C. (2017). *Social Theory: The Multicultural, Global and Classical Readings. 6th Edition.* Philadelphia: Westview Press.

Lorey, I. (2015). State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious. London: Verso.

Lyotard, J. F. (1974). *Libidinal Economy.* (I. H. Grant Trans). Bloomington & Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Marcuse, H. (1974). *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud.* Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1955).

Marcuse, H. (2006). *One Dimensional Man*. London: Routledge.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (2008). The Communist Manifesto. New York: Oxford World Classics.

Marx, K. (1887). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol 1.* Moscow: Progress Publishers.

McLuhan, M. Fiore, Q. (1967). *The Medium is the Massage.* London: Penguin Books.

Merton, R, K. (1967*). Social Structure and Anomie.* Social Theory and Social Structure. New York: The Free Press.

Miller J-A (1994) *Extimité.* In: Bracher M, Alcorn MWJ, Corthell RJ, Massardier Kenney F (eds), *The Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 74–87.

Mitscherlich, A. (1970). *Society without the father: A contribution to social psychology*. (Trans. E. Mosbacher.) Oxford, England: Schocken Books.

Morozov, E. (2011). *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom.* Public Affairs. New York: NY.

Nagle, A. (2017). *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan And Tumblr To Trump And The Alt-Right.* Alresford*:* Zero Books.

Neumann, F, L. (1957). *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State: Essays in Political and Legal Theory*. Free Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1884). *Beyond Good and Evil.* New York: Dover Publications Inc.

Nietzsche, F. (1887). *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, R. (1995). *Ironists and Metaphysicians, The Truth About Truth.* Ed. W. T. Anderson. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.

Rosa, H. (2013). *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity.* (J. Trejo-Mathys Trans). New York: Columbia University Press.

Rose, G. (2014). *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno.* New York: Verso.

Standing, G. (2011). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class.* London: Bloomsbury Revelations.

Stiegler, B. (2010). *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*. (S. Barker Trans.)

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Stiegler, B. (2008). *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation.* (S. Barker Trans). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Stiegler, B. (2015) *Symbolic Misery, Volume 2: The Catastrophe of the Sensible.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Stiegler, B. (2013) *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals: Disbelief and Discredit, 2*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Stiegler, B. (2014). *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism.* Malden, MA: Polity Press

Stiegler, B. (2017). *Automatic Society: The Future of Work.* (D. Ross Trans). Cambridge: Polity.

Suler, J. (2004). *The Online Disinhibition Effect.* Cyberpsychology & Behaviour, Vol. 7, No. 3. New Jersey: Rider University.

Taylor, C. (1991). *The Malaise of Modernity.* Concord: House of Anansi Press Limited.

Traverso, E. (2019). *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far-Right.* New York: Verso.

Tomšiĉ, S. (2015). *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan.* London: Verso.

Wallace, D, F. (1993). *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.* Review of Contemporary Fiction.

Wallace, D. F. (2007). *Deciderization 2007—A Special Report.* Houghton Mifflin Company.

Weber, M. (2001). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* (T. Parsons Trans.) London and New York: Routledge Classics.

Zazlove, J. (1983). *The Literacy of the Spectacle: The Legacy of Walter Benjamin and the Production of Performance.* Open Letter: Essays on [Performance] and Cultural Politicization. Summer-Fall, Fifth Series.

Žižek, S. (1991). *For they do not know what they do: Enjoyment as a political factor.* New York: Verso.

Žižek, S. (1999). *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Žižek, S. (2016). *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror, and Other Troubles with the Neighbours.* London: Penguin.