



Social Geometry

Oliver Noster

Introduction

It is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities.

— Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*

This book will come as no surprise to those who knew me when I was young. My interest in the union of mathematics with social phenomena began in elementary school, where I started tallying the interactions of my peers. I started as simply as possible: one tally mark any time two people initiated a conversation. Initially, I wanted to use this data to construct a graph of the social network in my class, but I stumbled upon something else; the two people with the most interactions in my list commenced a romantic relationship (which, at the age of ten, consists essentially of an obligation to sit together on the swings at recess). After this discovery, I abandoned my initial project of constructing a graph, and started collecting data in this form religiously, and I found that my discovery was no fluke. This project culminated in a twist; I discovered my sister was about to start “dating” a kid I particularly disliked. This was enough for me to realize that my endeavours were too close to home.¹ My interest in social phenomena did not end here (as made apparent by this book), but it became less fruitful, and a bit more spiteful. After refining a formula for computing the chance that a kid with a certain dispensation will make an

¹Imagine my reaction when Facebook announced on Valentine’s Day that they could predict a burgeoning relationship.

obnoxious outburst within a given interval of time, my very spiritual and intelligent friend told me that I was misguided, because human behavior cannot be predicted.

Perhaps because of my mathematical perspective (“fixation” would be the less flattering term), I was always very attracted to sociometric models, optimistic but skeptical about statistical models, and very wary of psychoanalytic models and their kin. While sociometry is indispensable to the work presented here (the social network is the “manifold” on which we analyze “social geometry”), the reader will find that psychoanalysis is in no way subordinate. The questions that must be on the reader’s mind, then, are: what are the motivations of this book? Is it to unify sociometry with psychoanalysis?

The first motivation for this text is that many of the theoretical issues arising from the analysis of social phenomena are of an inherently geometric nature. Often, even if there is no explicit conceptual framework in place, we must:

- Observe social phenomena from different “resolutions,” ranging from the local (for instance a small group or individual) to the global (possibly a nation or ethnicity).
- Account for the composition of phenomena in coarse resolutions by phenomena in fine resolutions (e.g. the interaction of American culture with its constituents).
- Explain, if possible, the temporal geometry of social processes: for instance, are they periodic or linear?

Even the first two items are surprisingly rich and powerful areas of investigation; furthermore, they seem to rest upon a sociometric geometry. The first item is certainly not unique to this work, but it does take on a characteristic light when viewed from this geometric perspective: for instance we may ask whether psychoanalysis is just *localized* social analysis. Furthermore, this item

is not only not as simple as it seems, but is an issue that is becoming ever more pressing as the fluidity and complexity of social networks grows combinatorially with the availability of communications technology. The second item should be familiar: for instance, the application of psychoanalytic thought to social analysis is a special case of it. There is a very clear value to making explicit the many deductions made by psychoanalysts, anthropologists, etc. from the individual to the social and vice versa. The third item is, unlike the first two, a topic that will undoubtedly evoke some skepticism in the reader because of its notorious history, and because of the many dangers of attempting to extrapolate diachronic properties from synchronic properties. Still, it is certainly possible to gain some insight into some phenomena: a key factor in the appreciation of an artwork, for instance, is the history of the appreciation of that artwork. This already gives a momentum, a force, a linearity to the work itself. Furthermore, it is not so clear that the “geometry” of the social process relates in any way to the “geometry” of the social network, so we should be consider whether it is even a question to be answered in the same breath as its predecessors.

The second motivation for this text is the issue of generalizing the concept of communication and specializing the concept of behavior so as to delineate a field of study in the intersection of semiotics and sociology. So how do we declare an object of study where everything from Katie Paterson’s candle to shoveling dirt to the poetics of police reports is a potential object of inquiry? To do this we define our objects of inquiry as Text, where Text is *that which can be produced and consumed by humans*. This definition may seem absurdly expansive, but in the text that follows, we hope to demonstrate that from this perspective a new side to human interaction is revealed.

We have, now, two motivations for this text, but it remains to unify them. At the risk of overselling this book, we can state that it is this: a perspective from which matters of psyche, society, and

6

communication align.

Chapter 1

Form and Content

1.1 Literal Interpretation

The most obvious commonality to the communicative modalities is the distinction between form and content. While there is a general consensus for any particular medium with regard to what aspects of a work consist of form and what consists of content, it is no small task to generalize this to all that we would call Text (which, to those readers with a sprite-like spirit, is defined in italics at the end of the introduction.)

Since defining a distinction between form and content for all Text is a large task, we will begin with just language, by which we mean the written and spoken word (referred to here as text). The most natural way to distinguish form from content in the case of language is to declare the content to be the “literal” meaning of the text. (The word “literal” is left in quotations so that we do not immediately assume that it is so easy to define.) The form, then, would be defined by that which is not encapsulated by the literal meaning. Given an ironic comment such as “yes, I would love to work Saturday,” this model would have us declare the content to

be the unironic statement “yes, I would love to work Saturday” and the form to be anything else. Now, this model has some clear flaws (read: is a straw man), but the criticism of this model proves more useful than the model itself, especially for those of us untouched by post-structuralism.

To see some of the limitations of this theory, one only needs to consider linguistic phenomena. Consider the French word *cherise*, for instance, which is the source of the English word “cherries.” Now, at some point the singular word *cherise* became misinterpreted as a plural, “cherries,” and a new singular word, “cherry,” was created. Therefore, at some point the “literal” meaning of “cherries” shifted from singular to plural. How do we pin down exactly when this shift occurred? To do so requires some notion of these “literal” meanings being determined by a consensus, but even this is not so simple. We then need to account for different sub-communities each having their different consensus (e.g. technical jargon). Even if this complexity can be managed in a reasonable way, there are still more drawbacks to this approach.

For one thing, the distinction between form and content of any particular text will vary with time and place. Therefore, if we call the “literal” meaning of a text the content, then any analysis of an ancient text under this model requires that we either a) attribute its content to the “literal” meaning in the time, place, and community each text was written in and for, which means that distinguishing form content will likely be intractable, or b) attribute its content to the “literal” meaning at the time of analysis, which means that the form and content of the document are ever-shifting. While the latter option may not be an unthinkable burden, it certainly runs counter to intuitions about the difference between form and content, and it does not allow us to talk about the text across its interactions with different communities in a fruitful way. In fact, an even bigger issue reveals itself when we consider that there is no guarantee all communities of language-users will define such a thing as a “literal” meaning. The absence of such a

distinction would leave our model severely wanting.

There is another nuisance in this model that reveals itself when we begin to look at speech. For example, someone may speak a sentence which may be interpreted as either “hear a bird” or “here, a bird.” In this case, it is not obvious how the “literal” meaning of the sentence can be resolved in the face of such ambiguity. Unsurprisingly, the word “literal” comes from the Latin *litteralis*, which means “of or pertaining to letters or writing,” and which is an indication that this model, even despite its very limited scope, is still preferential to some media.

Although this model is clearly very weak, it helps to elucidate the many pitfalls that can arise when trying to distinguish form from content, and this is before the realization that it would be incredibly difficult, or even impossible, to generalize to all Text, even if it did have satisfactory explanatory power for language.

1.2 Viral and Parasitic

If bisecting messages into “the literal meaning” and “the rest” is a poor way to understand language, then how do we preserve the notions of form and content, and above all while maintaining a general enough definition to be able to extend the definition to cover all Text? The easiest way to begin to answer this question is to consider the “memes” where text is used to label the elements of a picture. In this way, each picture used for this purpose is a metaphor ready to be made; the whole thought is provided, just not the contents. Of course, an outside observer would probably say that the most striking element of this format is that it is the picture that is reproduced, not the text that labels the picture. With this in mind, we produce a new set of definitions: for a text t , $V(t)$ (the Viral component) is that which reproduces itself in the Text of those who consume it, and $P(t)$ (the Parasitic component) is the surplus.

This definition is a curious one, so it is best to see it in application to begin to understand its consequences. Let us first apply this definition to the topic: the meme constructed by labeling elements of a picture. What we initially noticed was that the picture is often reproduced, but the text is generally not. This does indicate that the picture is part of the Viral of the object, but it is not so easy to declare that the text is entirely Parasitic.

To understand this we can again approach the question of the form and content of language, but through the new lens. The easiest way to do this is to enumerate aspects of language that reproduce themselves in the listener: dialect, register, diction, rhetoric, etc. In other words, the Viral is the ineffable poetics of language, the “way of speaking” that makes any good author so easily recognizable. (This, then, is the paradox, although it is not so hard to resolve: that which is given from the author to the reader is that which makes the author unique.) These same aspects of language apply to the text within the memes discussed above; the diction of the meme, for instance, can influence the diction of those who read it. In this way, we have the Viral of the “sub-medium” maintaining many of its properties in its inclusion in the larger medium. The natural question, then, is whether there is any Viral in the picture-text that cannot be accounted for between the Viral of the picture or the Viral of the text. This clearly is the case, because, as is easily observable, every picture becomes associated with text of a particular ilk.

1.3 Surplus-Enjoyment

At this point it would be easy to make assumptions about the relative value of $V(t)$ and $P(t)$ and their different modes of action, but, given the generality of the definitions used so far, any such statements must be made very carefully. To give a general impression of the differences between the Viral and Parasitic, however,

we can, in a brief respite from rigor, consider the Cubists. Before we begin to ask whether the Viral or Parasitic components of Cubist paintings was more valuable, we should first ask what the Viral and Parasitic components were. Because $V(t)$ is the epidemic quality the work, it follows that, in this context at least, the Viral element of the Cubist paintings can be mostly attributed to their Cubism-ness. That is to say, the unique poetics of Cubism yields precisely the epidemic attribute that defines $V(t)$. Rather than say that the Parasitic is the most valuable part of a work, then, we might actually be tempted to claim that the Viral is the most valuable part; after all, there must have been something in Cubism that resonated with many people, and this something is its Cubism-ness. Although this argument may sound like sophistry, there are echoes of the same logic in Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*:

there is a fundamental homology between the interpretative procedure of Marx and Freud - more precisely, between their analysis of commodity and of dreams. In both cases the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly behind the form: the 'secret' to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form...but, on the contrary, *the 'secret' of this form itself.*[17]

After all of the previous discussion concerning proper ways of defining form and content, the reader may be suspicious of such an analogy without explicit definitions, but there is more to Žižek's analysis than some affirmation that "form matters," so it is worth following this analysis before reviewing the definitions. Žižek connects these two analyses through the Lacanian notion of surplus-enjoyment. For Marx's analysis, this is straightforward, because the notion of surplus-enjoyment is already implied by the Marx's idea of surplus value: commodities may offer more than

they can deliver, but we enjoy more than justify. This movement from commodities to psychoanalysis should not be as surprising as it may appear: marketing tries to sell something transcendent and ineffable. When customers buy clothes, for instance, it is not a purely economic matter (in the rationalist sense), but a matter of identity formation, insecurity, desire, etc.

The question that arises here is how to reconcile this claim of a relationship between “form” and surplus-enjoyment with the concept of $V(t)$ described above. Let us start with commodities first: the key insight here is that commodities must bring surplus-enjoyment, or they would not be able to charge more than the cost of labor. That is to say, it is not that Coca-Cola must bring anyone surplus-enjoyment, but rather that *because of Coca-Cola’s success*, it must bring people surplus-enjoyment (and Marx’s insight, of course, is that this is due to its form). But notice here how we have ended where we started: because of Coca-Cola’s success, it has undeniably had an impact on the creation of Text: it is, symbolically at least, more American than most Americans. This impact is $V(t)$, and this is precisely what brings the surplus-enjoyment. In other words, what Marx was referring to as form is, in the case of successful commodities, exactly $V(t)$.

To return to the discussion of Cubism, then, the Cubism-ness, $V(t)$, is the source of surplus-enjoyment. Since the enjoyment of art is, one could argue, entirely surplus-enjoyment, one can even claim that the value of art lies in its Viral component rather than its Parasitic component. To go yet another stop further, there is even the argument that the Parasitic should be minimized, since the best art is entirely Viral. This gives us an explanation of why James Joyce claimed that good writing has the property that the reader can remember exactly which words were used (a property that Shakespeare’s works undeniably embody)¹; a good writer

¹Although this may be a misattribution, because I have had no success identifying the source of the remark.

has good poetics, and any words that are not remembered (at least subconsciously) are, by definition, Parasitic.

Now, it would be absurd to claim that all Viral Text is a matter of the production of surplus-enjoyment. Clearly, propagation can be effected with no enjoyment, or with enjoyment that is not surplus-enjoyment. Rather, the relationship is the other way around: surplus-enjoyment requires $V(t)$ as a vehicle because of its dependence on the Symbolic Order. Therefore, in order to understand surplus-enjoyment, we must understand $V(t)$.

To clarify how surplus-enjoyment relies on the Viral, we can consider the case of the fad diet: clearly it is not the list of permitted and forbidden foods that is the appeal of fad diets. In fact, these diets seem infinitely variable, consisting of: mostly carbs, no carbs, all fruit, no fruit, six meals a day, one meal a day, etc. The appeal of these diets, then, is the surplus-enjoyment of renunciation and rigor. This, of course, is exactly the Viral component that is common to them, and which spreads despite variations. This explains the paradox of fad dieters: rather than being adherents to one diet or another, they often try many. The same explanation is relevant to many 21st century phenomena from polyphasic sleep to lifestyle minimalism, and it is relevant to more insidious phenomena such as fascism as well.

1.4 The Sociological Sheaf

An intricacy that we immediately encounter when trying to ascertain $V(t)$ is that there is a hidden variable: $V(t)$ depends not only on t , but on the radius of the social network used in defining $V(t)$. This, of course, is not a unique property of $V(t)$, but rather is characteristic of a wide number of sociological phenomena. To explain the relevance of this phenomenon, we will provide to examples.

Firstly, consider Slavoj Žižek's favorite example of the lighter in Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*: this lighter binds the ac-

tions of the two main characters, Guy and Bruno, and determines their relationship to one another. However, the significance of the lighter ends approximately there, a point that is made to humorous effect at the end of the film, when a police officer must clarify whether the unassuming lighter in Bruno's hand really is the same lighter that was the object of such drama. The only significance of this is the rather banal point that the symbols that structure human interaction are, even if not necessarily so malleable by human agency, regional and provincial.

A second example occurs when we localize $V(t)$ as much as possible, namely at the writer of t . Before we consider the ramifications of this, let us first be reminded of the phenomenon which is a perennial favorite of bloggers with a burgeoning interest in the social: the endless cycle of mutual simulation formed by television and society. We can find a less discussed and more unnerving phenomenon at a smaller scale; consider the case of a writer who has just had great success. Her agent schedules her for numerous interviews over the course of the next year, and she (for the first interview at least) attends to the questions with great care. It is undeniable that in her first interview, she will be asked to describe her writing process and philosophy. Necessarily, there will be elements of her craft that she succeeds in verbalizing and others that she does not. Surely, this seems like no serious problem. However, in the subsequent interviews, she will likely rely on this first verbalization, despite its omissions. Maybe she will manage to verbalize a bit more of her craft, but always there will be something missing. The interesting phenomenon, then, occurs when she returns to work: now her verbalization of her craft has become a weak verbal contract, and she will not be able to work without emulating this verbalization. Of course, this means a divergence, however slight, from the original process.

A similar situation arises when we consider the utility of internally vocalizing thoughts, rather than leaving them abstract and wordless (to those who doubt that thoughts exist without their

verbalization: why finish sentences in your head when you already know how they end?), and we find an answer by analogy: verbalizing thoughts ensures their survival. This rings of Michael Foucault's admission: *Je ne dis pas les choses parce que je les pense, je dis les choses pour ne plus les penser (I do not say things because I think them, I say them so that I do not have to think them any longer)*. Verbalization externalizes thought, ridding it of the need to be rethought. Consider the case of a student who, in smuggling notes to the test, has to consult them frequently.

What $V(t)$ gives us is precisely the answer we are looking for the dilemma of the author (which is the same as the dilemma of television, and which is also the dilemma of the social media celebrity[3]): what does her craft tend towards as she is caught in this cycle of self-emulation? The answer is that what she emulates is $V(t)$, where t is her verbalization of her craft (and the social scope is her alone): it is the Viral nature of her own statement. We can then ask what happens when this process is repeated, and we will find that there is little change. Because the Viral is eminently Viral, there will be a fairly close correspondence between her enacting the Viral and her verbalization of the Viral, barring change to her person. This aligns with the intuition that external stimulus is generally a much more rapid instigator of behavioral change than introspection.

With both the example of the lighter and the example of the author, we can observe the significance of considering the radius of sociological phenomena (even going so far as to consider the interaction of a person with herself as just localized sociology), not that this is any unique observation. If the reader will allow me some mathematical extravagance, I would like to form an analogy here between this type of sociological entity and the mathematical concept of a sheaf (although this construction is much less general than its mathematical counterpart).

A *sociological sheaf* F is an association of data with social networks such that:

1. Given a collection of sub-networks (tagged with data) of a social network N that, taken together, cover N , any element of data common to the data in each sub-network is also an element of $F(N)$.

The intuition behind this is that a sociological sheaf provides a geometric tagging of a social network with data. Simply put, this axiom requires us to be able to “glue” together the data of small networks to find data tagged to the larger network. In other words, it allows us to view a social phenomenon at different levels of “resolution,” from the micro to the macroscopic, while preserving the relationships between the different levels.

$V(t)$ is then clearly a sociological sheaf, when we consider the extra variable of the social network (and fix t), yielding $V(t, N)$. This axiom is satisfied by the definition of $V(t)$, which, if it traverses sub-networks which cover a larger network, must traverse the larger network as well.

Chapter 2

Discourse and Methodology

Before analyzing issues surrounding discourse with more powerful machinery, we must first present the issues in their appropriate context with some degree of simplicity, especially as regards their relationship to the concepts, such as $V(t)$ and $P(t)$, introduced above. Hence, this chapter should be read as naive and speculative, rather than as rigorous and precise.

2.1 The Uniqueness of Language

Language is more than just the prototypical Text, e.g. the metaphor by which we seek to understand Text. What separates language from other Text is in its ability to be highly self-referential. While some may be discouraged by the realization that analysis of Text is, in itself, just more Text, from the perspective of $V(t)$ and $P(t)$, this realization radically simplifies the task of investigating Text. Claude Levi-Strauss says that Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex is just another instantiation of the myth of Oedipus [14], we can see that latent in this claim is a realization of the Viral component of the myth.

One consequence of this is the ability of language to limit Text, or, to be slightly more specific, the ability of discourse to limit Text. For example, the standards of acceptable speech are determined by discourse (for example political discourse), and the standards of acceptable political discourse are also determined by discourse. Of course, the result of this is that the final determination of acceptability is always deferred, because the discourse can only validate itself, resulting in an infinite loop.

Nevertheless, the ability of discourse to limit discourse is undeniable, despite this constant deferral. This can be observed in academic institutions, where there is a relatively narrow range of acceptable discourse. Our interest in this topic, though, lies not in validating what discourse is or is not acceptable, but in analyzing the relationship between discourse and Text in general.

Immediately, one can see the relationship between this limiting effect of discourse and $V(t)$: the limitation on Text is a limitation on the Text's Viral component. To refer to the previous example, the Viral component of academic writing is limited by the standards of acceptability. If we view $V(t)$ as a sociological pathogen, then discourse that limits $V(t)$ acts as an inoculation against pathogens.

2.2 Extrinsic Meaning

Michel Foucault demonstrated an awareness of the uniqueness of language in his account of the techniques of discipline: "there were several new things in these [disciplinary] techniques: ... the modality... is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement." [4]. Foucault is referring, above all, to time-tables, which are inseparable from the concept of the modern prison. However, this is just a specific example of a more general desire to replace the "unconscious" order that structures human behavior with a "conscious", verbalized or-

der.

It is well-known among anthropologists that the order that structures human behavior is unconscious, but this idea may be unfamiliar to those from other fields:

We know that among most primitive peoples it is very difficult to obtain a moral justification or a rational explanation for any custom or institution. When he is questioned, the native merely answers that things have always been this way, that such was the command of the gods or the teaching of the ancestors. Even when interpretations are offered, they always have the character of rationalizations or secondary elaborations. There is rarely any doubt that the unconscious reasons for practicing a custom or sharing a belief are remote from the reasons given to justify them. Even in our own society, table manners, social etiquette, fashions of dress, and many of our moral, political, and religious attitudes are scrupulously observed by everyone, although their real origin and function are not often critically examined.[14]

A concrete example of this claim is given in the essay *Do Dual Organizations exist?*, where Claude Levi-Strauss examines a case of conflicting information:

...Radin noted a curious discrepancy among the answers of the old people who were his informants. They described, for the most part, a circular village plan in which the two moieties were separated by an imaginary diameter running northwest and southeast. However, several informants vigorously denied that arrangement and outlined another, in which the lodges of the moiety chiefs were in the center rather than on

the periphery. According to Radino, the first pattern was always described by informants of the upper phratry and the second by informants of the lower phratry.[14]

Although we are not necessarily concerned with technical anthropological issues, it is important to observe that the conscious account of social phenomena is nothing more than a model; this is not a new idea, but rather something like a social extension of Freud's discovery that the self is not self-transparent. This is why Lacan invites us to find the "ex-sistence (that is, of the eccentric place) in which we must necessarily locate the subject of the unconscious, if we are to take Freud's discovery seriously" in *Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"*. [12] Of course, this place is the titular letter (a significant pun).

There is a dual side to this ex-sistence in Poe's story: the purloined letter "traverses him without them interpenetrating in any respect." [12] If we undo the near-tmesis of "interpenetrating" we see that this is about interpretation: it is no accident that the contents of the purloined letter are not divulged. (This makes the letter into an object not unlike the lighter from *Strangers on a Train*: "from A to G.") Just because the letter is not interpenetrated does not mean that it cannot be interpreted. As Lacan says, "a letter always arrives at its destination." [12] Poe invites us, then, to interpret the letter by analyzing it from without rather than from within. But is not *lysis* indispensable to analysis? (The negative answer to this question reveals the impotence of *lysis*, including that of the etymological variety.) Rather, all analysis splits from without, like Lacan's famous example of restrooms: the signifiers "Men" and "Women" splitting them from without. That is to say that, for example, even *Ecrits* gains meaning from without; it is not an internal structure that may be identified, but the structure of discourse as it folds around the text. (In computer science, this

operation is common in the form of replacing methods with procedures: *object.copy()* may become *copy(object)*.¹

From this perspective, we can view codification (e.g. in the form of legal documents) successively as (1) something produced by people, with an internal structure to be consulted, (2) a talisman upon which an existing structure is made incarnate, and (3) a virus, on the same plane as, shaping, and shaped extrinsically by, discourse. It would be too hasty to assume from (3) that there is not something unique about codification as opposed to, for instance, idols. It is precisely the self-referentiality of language (and the inoculatory power that arises therefrom) that gives codification the power to speak us.

2.3 The Discourse Theory of Art

To demonstrate how discourse can act as an inoculation against $V(t)$, we can propose a new theory of the value of art: an artwork's value is to be judged by the amount of discourse it generates. We can reach this theory by blindly performing the operation described in the last section to a common perspective on art; instead of declaring that the meaning of an artwork resides (intrinsically) in a "hard kernel" that evades symbolization, we declare that the meaning of the artwork exists (extrinsically) in the "infinite limit" of the discourse it finds itself in. Before moving further with this definition, let us first explain why some of the obvious refutations do not succeed.

The first refutation that may come to mind is that this definition implies that popular art is of the most value. While this argument seems sound at first, we should recognize that there is a temporal aspect to the hypothesis: an artwork that continues to generate discourse over a large period of time is clearly inferior

¹Python has a frustrating but amusing use of *self* for this purpose, if one should be interested in taking this analogy too far.

to an artwork that generates discourse only a short period of relevance (as is the case for most popular music, for instance). This resembles the sentiment among fans of popular music that some period of time must pass before an album can be deemed a “classic,” in order to prove its longevity.

The second obvious refutation is that an artwork that intends to generate controversy may succeed despite its “shallowness.” While there are certainly some real examples of this, this refutation falls in the face of an interesting turn; this refutation is, in fact, a refutation of itself. To explain, an artwork that aims to generate controversy will not, in fact, generate much discourse unless it has further merits, because it can be dismissed as being controversy-seeking! Now, while this does not have to be the case universally, it is a fact of the modern Western discourse of art that art that can be explained away this easily will not generate much further discourse.

This is an example of the inoculatory power of discourse: by dismissing a banal, controversy-seeking artwork, further discourse is limited, and this acts as a mechanism to prevent the spread of the Viral component of the artwork. Another way of viewing this is that, although the value of an artwork may come from its ability to generate discourse, an artwork that attempts to accomplish this directly is likely to be dismissed for that very reason. Because of this, it is only possible for an artwork to succeed as a byproduct. This helps to explain why there is still a bit of a stigma against art that makes apparent its attempts to please the consumer.

2.4 Methodology as Discourse

A similar analysis can be performed for science; scientific theories are not given *a priori* justification, but find their justification in the methodology. That is to say, while any given theory is almost certainly incomplete, one can trust that the methodol-

2.5. OVERDETERMINATION AND UNDERDETERMINATION

ogy itself is eventually self-correcting. Of course, it also does not make sense to equate the methodology of science with the meta-methodology of science: many different “implementations” of scientific methodologies could adhere to the scientific method and have a similar claim to justification. For instance, a community could undertake scientific research with different standards for statistical significance or for the duplication of experiments.

There is another issue to consider, to, which is that, if we are to trust the methodology of science, we must also trust the methodology that led to the discovery of the methodology of science (and, presumably, will lead to changes to the methodology of science as necessary). We see in this dilemma the same specter of infinite deferral that we encountered with discourse: methodology is nothing more than a limitation on discourse, and it suffers from the same problems. That does mean it can be dismissed with, however, since it is important to inoculate scientific research.

This same theme arises again in philosophy, where we find division and debate over methodologies (the most obvious example being the analytic-continental divide). There is even a difference between schools and thinkers on their emphasis on methodology: for the average humanities scholar, Foucault with his genealogy and archaeology is probably the most transparent example of this. We find this same antigen property of discourse when thinkers are dismissed with terms such as “obscurantist” and the like.

Because of this infinite deference, it is important to be wary of placing excessive trust in any methodology, just as one should be wary of placing excessive trust in any interpretation of a text.

2.5 Overdetermination and Underdetermination

It is difficult to discuss the meaning of Text without referring to its overdetermination. That is to say that there is a latent pluralism that results from the antinomies of the symbolic order.

To clarify these issues, let us consider briefly the film *The Shining*. We quickly find that it lends itself to many irreconcilable interpretations. For instance, we can interpret it as a film about the effects of imperialism on Native Americans or as a film about domestic violence, etc. We could attempt to resolve this dilemma by claiming that there is one "correct" interpretation, but most enthusiasts of the film would say exactly the opposite: that in order to fully appreciate the film, one should be able to see it from all of these perspectives. A second way we could try to resolve the dilemma, then, is to say that it is a film about all of these things. This solution has two problems. Firstly, not all interpretations have equal value, so this theory would have to be amended to account for some gradation. Secondly, this solution is incorrect because it stumbles into a paradox: saying "*The Shining* is a film about both *A* and *B*" is not the same as saying "*The Shining* is a film about *both A and B*."

In other words, *The Shining* acts more as a superposition of these different meanings than as an amalgamation of them. One should strive to see the film from different perspectives, but that does not mean that they can be combined into one perspective and preserve the meaning of the film. To move the example to the absurd: one should see the Louvre from the front, and one should see the Louvre from the back, but there is no need to see it from both places at once.

In the realm of beliefs, if we view cognitive beliefs as analogous to interpretations, and noncognitive beliefs as analogous to perspectives, we can see the same phenomenon in action. For example, consider the prevalence of otherwise rational people who adhere to astrology, Wicca, etc. without "truly" believing. In *The Sorcerer and His Magic*, Claude Levi-Strauss discusses how the resolution of such antinomies is not qualitatively different (or an escape from) the irrationality of magic, but rather the defining characteristic of magical belief (in stark contrast to the New Age phenomena mentioned above): "...man asks magical thinking to pro-

2.5. OVERDETERMINATION AND UNDERDETERMINATION 25

vide him a new system of reference, within which the thus-far contradictory elements can be integrated.”[14]

The potential pluralism of perspectives on the part of consumers of a Text is not unlike the gestalt psychologists' famous optical illusion that can be interpreted as either a face or a vase. The linguistic phenomenon of “code switching” is an example of how this can affect the study of $V(t)$: one must be careful not to make generalizations about what parts of a Text have and have not been transferred to other individuals, because they may only show up in the Text of these individuals in specific contexts. For instance, reading phrases found on the internet might not lead to the use of these phrases in speech, even if it does affect their writing on the internet.

One should suspect such an overdetermination of meaning, if it is truly fundamental to the symbolic, to be related to symbolic structure in some way. Žižek confronts exactly this point with respect to the Lacanian *point de capiton*, or quilting point, in order to explain ideological overdetermination:

What creates and sustains the *identity* of a given ideological field beyond all possible variations of its positive content? *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* delineates what is probably the definitive answer to this crucial question of the theory of ideology: the multitude of 'floating signifiers', of proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning.

Ideological space is made of non-bound, non-tied elements, 'floating signifiers', whose very identity is 'open', overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements - that is, their 'literal' signification depends on their metaphorical surplus-signification. *Ecol-*

ogism, for example: its connection with other ideological elements is not determined in advance; one can be a state-oriented ecologist (if one believes that only the intervention of a strong state can save us from catastrophe), a socialist ecologist (if one locates the source of merciless exploitation of nature in the capitalist system), a conservative ecologist (if one preaches that man must again become deeply rooted in his native soil), and so on; *feminism* can be socialist, apolitical...; even *racism* could be elitist or populist The 'quilting' performs the totalization by means of which this free floating of ideological elements is halted, fixed - that is to say, by means of which they become parts of the structured network of meaning.[17]

It is worth considering whether this same phenomenon can operate on a register more subtle than that of belief (in the cognitive sense). For instance, a patient whose problem is some variation on the eternal "I interpret every event in the least charitable way" could likely be "cured" by reading their horoscope in the morning.

Consider also the con artist's reliance on greed to assuage the victim's wariness; the only obstacle to such a strategy is a suspicion of good luck. Would not the con artist's ploy ("I will give you 10,000 USD to help me") be vastly more effective if, that very morning, the victim had opened a fortune cookie predicting "a chance encounter will bring you good luck?" Regardless of the victim's belief or nonbelief in the predictive power of fortune cookies, its mere ability to tie an otherwise un-associated event to a network of associations is powerful. That is to say, that an "underdetermined" event becomes "determined."

Chapter 3

Essays

3.1 Introduction

What follows is a trio of essays that apply the concepts outlined above in a way that both serves to demonstrate their practical utility as well as to illuminate some of the more delicate points. Because these essays concern social, cultural, and artistic matters, the items of theoretical pertinence are not always made explicit within the essays themselves, so in the introduction here I provide a brief commentary on the theoretical implications of each essay.

The first essay in the series is *Sabrina and the Myth of the Seer*, and it seeks to extract the Viral element of the myth of the seer from American culture and analyze its dependence on social structure. The primary point of theoretical interest is the realization that, like with any communication, changes in circumstance can change the meaning of $V(t)$, even if $V(t)$ itself remains the same. The reader may want to consider this from the perspective of the “convergence of $V(t)$ ” hinted at in *The Sociological Sheaf*: while the Viral component may converge, this does not necessarily indicate a convergence of meaning. This, of course, is a point discussed *ad*

nauseum in American culture apropos of nostalgic films and their ilk, but which is still worth repeating here for its broader theoretical implications.

The second essay is *Cringe Comedy Inaction*. This essay describes the reliance of cringe comedy on the interaction between subjects and the symbolic order, and demonstrates how the genre may be used both as an early indicator of, and as a source of insight for effecting, social change. This is also where the challenge of constructing a sociological sheaf from the symbolic order is introduced.

The third essay, *The Overdetermination of the Mole*, uses the film *El Topo* to introduce the Neo-Freudian reclamation of shamanistic techniques, and provides an example of how an “overdetermined” artwork can be resolved.

3.2 Sabrina and the Myth of the Seer

There is an unwritten rule in fiction that seers must be on the margins of society. Examples of stories that abide by this rule abound: *The Stand*, *The Shining*, *Sula*, and even Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. Of course, the obvious counterexample to this rule is that of the biblical prophets; if the seer is necessarily the Remainder, how can a Jewish prophet be the Remainder (in a Jewish tradition)? This is because, as Slavoj Žižek explains in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, “the Jews are...a remainder in and of themselves - the rest, that which remains and persists after all the persecutions and annihilations.”[18] The apocalyptic prophet Daniel is no exception to this rule, since he is part of the Jewish Remainder in Babylon (and his Babylonian name, Belteshazzar, bears witness to this fact). The difference, of course, between Daniel and *The Stand*’s Abigail Freemantle, is that (apropos of normative American society) Abigail is the Remainder without, whereas Daniel is the Remainder within. This shift can be attributed to modernity: the

passage of the locus of privileged sight from the Remainder within to the Remainder without. The necessity of this shift in modernity is elucidated by examining the nature of this privileged sight. To use Lacanian terminology, the seer is one who is given an ability to partially answer the question *che vuoi* (what do you want?) apropos of the Other, where the Other here is found in some notion of divinity, and in being given this partial answer can attempt to answer the question "what do I want?" With this in mind, it should be apparent how the loss of access to the Other which defines modernity leads to the locus of this privileged insight shifting to outside the social. Nathaniel Peaslee, the unfortunate victim of possession in Lovecraft's *The Shadow Out of Time*, is the exception that proves this rule. While Lovecraft's horror is often described as the horror of the unknown, it is better described as the horror of the unknown as seen by Society (rather than its Remainder). By giving such a character access to the brutal and incomprehensible Other (which is no less brutal and incomprehensible in the Bible), Lovecraft creates a gross inversion: what should be marginal is normative. To see why this choice is so transgressive, we need only turn to the aforementioned connection between *che vuoi* and "what do I want?" By virtue of Nathaniel's access to an incomprehensible Other (*che vuoi*), the reader is left with a sense of nihilism ("what do I want?"). By virtue of Nathaniel's normativity, this nihilism cannot be easily dismissed and threatens the foundations of modernity. It is no surprise, then, that those who read the Necronomicon are thrust from the Social into the Remainder due to insanity.

The Jeff Nichols film *Take Shelter*, then, as a film that assigns the role of seer to a working-class white man (Curtis), appears to be another exception to the rule of the seer. However, there is an important distinction: whereas Lovecraft's characters come undeniably face-to-face with the Other, Curtis is given only ambiguity, and it is only reasonable to conclude that his mind is the issue he must confront. This is already much different from Lovecraft,

because the Other is internal, and it is this that makes all of the difference. If Lovecraft's violation of the rule of the seer is the source of its nihilism, then how is *Take Shelter* a sincere and meaningful film? This is because *Take Shelter* does not break the rule of the seer, but adheres to it, and this adherence marks an irreversible shift: the Remainder is no longer without but within. Of course, this event should come as no surprise, for it is the natural conclusion of a societal process that has been running for some time:

Witness the 'Society' column of *Le Monde*, in which paradoxically, only immigrants, delinquents, women, etc. appear - everything that has not been socialized, 'social' cases analogous to pathological cases...In designating residual categories as 'Society,' the social designates itself as a remainder.[1]

Anyone who denies the reality of or the urgent need to recognize the transubstantiation of the social into the remainder need only observe the "shocking" election of Donald Trump by half of the American population. This is the "storm" of *Take Shelter*: the vision of the storm, or the process by which Curtis becomes capable of receiving this vision. To explain this effect in terms of social processes: in modernity "God is dead," so access to the Other must come from the Remainder of society, but the re-integration of the Remainder into the social "proves" that no such access exists. Precisely what makes *Take Shelter* so compelling is that by stylistically encouraging viewers to compare it to horror, the radical distance between Lovecraft's seer in Society and Nichols's seer in the Remainder becomes all the more apparent.

Chilling Adventures of Sabrina appears to provide a refutation to this hypothesis in the form of the character Rosalind Walker, a black instantiation of the archetypal blind seer. To resolve this issue, we turn again to Žižek, who comments in "Is it Still Possible to be a Hegelian Today?" that "after a true historical break,

one simply cannot return to the past, one cannot go on as if nothing happened - if one does it, the same practice acquires a radically changed meaning.”[16] What, then, is the new meaning of this seer in the Remainder? It is first worth noting that the vast majority of the characters in this show with significant screentime see themselves as the Remainder, albeit unconvincingly. Sabrina is a woman and the daughter of a subversive leader, Prudence is a disenfranchised daughter, etc. Even the witches as a Whole perceive themselves as the Remainder of persecution. This attitude is echoed in the characters’ relationships with Sabrina (and with each other): no friend is a friend, and no enemy is an enemy. All of these relationships are blown about by unpredictable vicissitudes. What we have in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, then, is a world where everyone is, to herself, the Remainder. This is also the reason why the show’s attempts at direct social effect feel half-hearted; the viewer is not convinced there is any society left to be remedied. Sabrina’s identification as the Remainder is the most complex. If Christ, in crying “My god, my god, why hast thou forsaken me,” represents the finite and impotent nature of God, then Sabrina, as the anti-Christ, represents the finite and impotent nature of Luciferian (and liberal) ideals. As Christ is split from God (and God is split from God), Sabrina is at every turn split from herself. In expressing autonomy and individuality, she finds only predestination and coercion, making her the ultimate postmodern subject. In other words, Sabrina’s attempts at individuality are constantly thwarted by her inability to answer *che vuoi*, because, whether she turns to her friends, family, deceased family, tradition, Satan, or Lillith she cannot find the locus of her desire. This is, as Sabrina demonstrates, the necessary outcome of liberal processes. Whereas the Other may be identified with the Law in a more conservative society and thereby provide a partial answer to *che vuoi* (even if the only motivation it provides is transgression), by being in such a permissive world Sabrina’s inability to identify the Other renders useless her attempts at asserting

individuality. This inability to identify the Other explains the instances of privileged sight throughout the show. Rosalind's sight, despite what one would expect, provides no real insight into the Other, Harvey's visions are found to originate in something disappointingly finite, etc. In fact, the impotence of Satan leaves the viewer unsatisfied because Satan was the last remaining candidate for the identity of the Other (a narrative tactic that gives the viewer pleasure in watching Sabrina succumb to his demands). We have, therefore, an indivisible two-fold effect in Sabrina that mirrors the ultimate effect of liberal social processes: individuals are both Remainder and non-Remainder, and the identity of the Other is not ascertainable (i.e. the individual's desires are insoluble and privileged sight is finite). This is why the thorn of *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* is also its crown; each character's attempt at making herself the Remainder is subtly thwarted. In short, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* may be emotionally and politically impotent, but this is because of its fidelity to the state of the social.

3.3 Cringe Comedy Inaction

Cringe comedy is perhaps most succinctly characterized by the *Seinfeld* motto: "We live in a society!" The "cringe" itself is the result of an incongruence between the actions of an individual with her place in the symbolic order. However, to conclude that *Seinfeld* is a show about the arbitrary nature of etiquette would be to misread it entirely; this is exemplified in the infamous scene (based on Larry David's real experience) where George Costanza quits his job but, realizing he needs it, shows up to a meeting the next morning as if nothing has changed. The humor in this situation arises at the gap between what George is within the symbolic order (unemployed) with what he acts like (employed).

There is a subtle but important distinction between the humor of *Seinfeld* and that of Sacha Baron Cohen's work in the guise of

characters such as "Ali G" and "Borat:" whereas *Seinfeld* explores the tension between the subject and the symbolic order, Sacha Baron Cohen stakes out an identity within the symbolic order with which to turn it against itself. The film *Borat* can be described by the negation of the paradox of which neoreactionaries are consistently so fond: "neoliberals are intolerant of the intolerant." Borat's humor is precisely in the seemingly unending good faith of Cohen's victims in the face of the offensive and obscene. As a comedy teacher (ruddish and suppressing laughter) hired for *Borat* tells the titular character in response to an obscene story: "no, that would not be funny in America." This deconstructive subversion of the symbolic order is in contrast to the more direct subversion of *Seinfeld*.

It is difficult to describe cringe comedy as arising from the relationship of the subject to the symbolic order without reference to what is perhaps the most prominent example of this quality in American media: the superhero story. Superhero stories are, much like Bible stories, stories of individual agency granted by channeling, and for the preservation of, the symbolic order. Like Daniel in the lion's den, the superhero's success is guaranteed by an appeal to the State and its mythos (freedom, liberty, S.H.I.E.L.D.). Like the New Testament's salvation by grace, it is the appeal alone, rather than ethnicity, which demarcates the Social. This simultaneous accessibility of the Social (in that it requires only passive non-interference, as seen by the ever-neutered mob, like cattle before wolves, praying for the delay of the slaughter by the farmer's intervention) and reduction of the Remainder to a spectre guarantees the omnipotence of the State. (The byproduct of this contrast between the banality of the superhero and the spectral nature of the villain being the famous rule that the villains are the most compelling characters.) This channeling of the symbolic order is, by contrast, an easy way to understand the Larry David of *Seinfeld's* successor *Curb Your Enthusiasm*: the "ideal" Larry David, who is true to his own internal conception of the

symbolic order in the face of everything. While this might seem to be just an exaltation of the individual over the Social, the case is not so simple. This Ideal Larry's internal etiquette (e.g. the cut-off time) binds those around him, and his social paranoias bleed into reality without fail. None of this, of course, spares him from suffering in his indignation.

At first glance, Tim Robinson's sketch comedy show *I Think You Should Leave* shares the source of its humor with *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. As the title implies, *I Think You Should Leave* finds characters, often played by Tim Robinson, refusing to bend to social demands. However, while the two shows may share these comedic set-ups, the "punch lines" differ greatly. For instance, in one sketch, Tim Robinson plays a character who, unconvinced that a friend (and the host of the gathering) truly likes his gift, goes as far as to eat the gift's receipt. While this uncomfortable set-up could be straight out of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, things change towards the end, where the party devolves into accusations about the host's improper sanitation after using the restroom, and the host is abandoned. The key to understanding the difference between the two shows lies in the realization, firstly, that it is the symbolic order itself that is reversed (as seen by Tim Robinson's success in convincing the party guests to leave), and secondly, that the juvenile humor of the show (it is hard to think of a sketch that does not rely on blue humor) is not lazy writing. Rather, *I Think You Should Leave* conjurs the Golding-eque fear that the symbolic order that governs children is the same symbolic order that governs adults, and that propriety is nothing but veneer. In this way, the subversive characters of *I Think You Should Leave* are more like Marvel superheros than Larry David's characters: Tim Robinson's character in this sketch channels the "juvenile" symbolic order and, because of this, his success is guaranteed. Perhaps the most unique insight of *I Think You Should Leave* is that the symbolic order is not monic, but pluralistic and can be disrupted by "code switching." It is still true that, as Lacan says, we are more subjects

than agents of the symbolic order, but Tim Robinson's characters demonstrate the agency of the individual within the pluralistic field of "symbolic orders."¹

It is tempting to try to mobilize Tim Robinson's insight into a method for social change, but this must be done with some care. Naively, we might try to claim that the symbolic order forms a sociological sheaf. We are most interested in the gluing axiom: if each individual in a society shares a piece of their "internal symbolic orders", then this piece exists in the symbolic order at large. First, we should notice that the converse is not true: it is easily possible that something exists in the symbolic order that no individual believes in. Rather, it is only necessary that enough people believe *that it exists within the symbolic order*. For example, a celebrity scandal is unlikely to scandalize Americans in the twenty-first century. However, as long as enough people believe that *someone* must be scandalized, the news will still sell, and it will be a scandal nonetheless. We therefore have trouble constructing this sociological sheaf in the naive manner, because, when moving from individuals to society at large, there is an association, not from the individual's symbolic order to the society's symbolic order, but between the individual's representation of the symbolic order at large *within the symbolic order* and the symbolic order at large. Inverting this example, we see that the naive sociological sheaf does not clearly satisfy the gluing axiom: if every individual bemoans capitalism, this is no real threat to capitalism. In fact, as Slavoj Žižek suggests many times, ideology may even benefit more if it is not believed. Stepping aside from these technical issues, we can see that, most generally, cringe comedy is concerned with the na-

¹We should consider that such a regression of the symbolic order may be possible, even if it is not in such a direct way as portrayed in *I Think You Should Leave*. Interestingly, Freud hypothesizes a similar (infantile as opposed to juvenile) cause for the spiritual feeling of all-inclusiveness: "Thus we are perfectly willing to acknowledge that the 'oceanic' feeling exists in people, and we are inclined to trace it back to an early phase of ego-feeling." [5]

ture of this gluing axiom, with the question of how individuals come together to form a symbolic order, and how small groups come together to form larger symbolic orders.

Cringe comedy, then, is not a simple set of techniques, but is a sophisticated description (certainly it is not a prescription, hence the inherent inaction) of the relationship of the subject to the symbolic order, which is, of course, is not only complex and ever-changing, but is even perhaps the starting point for understanding either the individual or the Social. For this reason, it is fertile ground for the identification of un verbalized psychological and social phenomena.

3.4 The Overdetermination of the Mole

The difficulty in analyzing the eccentric Alejandro Jodorowsky's "acid western" *El Topo* (The Mole) lies in the Kafka-esque discrepancy between its mythical structure (and the invitation therefrom to interpret it as allegorical) and the frustration of attempts to "decode" it as such an allegory. What is clear in *El Topo*, however, is that its first half, an off-kilter Western, is a story of shamanistic competition. Like Quesalid bests a neighboring shaman with a more refined deceit (Structural Anthropology 176), *El Topo* bests a series of gunmen with trickery, but is ultimately bested himself by his partner Mara, the namesake of the demon who tempted Gautama Buddha.

The second half of the film presents a jarring narrative of an estranged people led to the site of their death, a town whose omnipresent logo is the eye of providence, by *El Topo*. We have between these two halves a series of oppositions: from shamanism to organized religion; from a devil dressed in black to something that can perhaps only be described as the coincidence in one man of Zarathustra and the tight-rope walker. The most natural way to interpret this is as resembling a historical progression, but we are

still left with the challenge of making sense of these oppositions.

We can transform this problem by folding the problem into a solution (like the transformation of an epistemological gap into an ontological fact in philosophy and physics): the overdetermination of the symbols in *El Topo*, the gratuitous use of death, rape, nudity, the ever-elusive pseudo-Eastern philosophy, is not an obstacle to the interpretation of the film, but rather its meaning. That is to say, that the shamanistic battles of the film's first half are battles of resolving antinomies (which is precisely what Claude Levi-Strauss describes as the function of shamanism).

Through this lens, we see that the oppositions between the movie's halves gain new meaning: the shamanistic pluralism is now a non-All unity (the eye of providence) and shamanism becomes psychoanalysis. To explain this second, more controversial, remark, we must take a short detour through the relationship between the terms which it opposes. Claude Levi-Strauss himself frequently relates them, saying, for instance, that while "in the schizophrenic cure the healer performs his actions and the patient produces his myth; in the shamanistic cure the healer supplies the myth and the patient performs the actions." [14] Were we, then, to imagine a new shamanism, with the form of the cure described in this way, but with its appeal (that which gives the shaman the status of the one presumed to know) as an appeal to the unconscious (psychoanalytic and ultimately biological), then we would have exactly a description of Jodorowsky's own *psychomagic*, forming the third part of a pseudo-Hegelian triad along with shamanism and psychoanalysis.

Psychomagic, despite being premised on the unconscious, substitutes the void of the individual (Lacan's barred subject), with a mythical, genealogical "over-self" (a term with a positively Nietzschean ring), thereby restoring unity to the self. This is, again, an application of the shamanistic method to psychoanalytic content, but which succeeds because psychoanalysis requires the efficacy of the (spoken) cure (myth) to be considered separately from its ob-

jective truth, since psychoanalysis is a prototype of the intersubjective endeavor. This is Jodorowsky's humorous, insightful, but ultimately frightening deconstructive twist.

This also subverts our previous set of oppositions, since psychoanalysis is not present in the latter half of the film: this is psychomagic. Rather, psychoanalysis is (we use here the old structuralist trick) the missing piece of the triadic structure around which this apparently diadic structure revolves. That is to say, that there is an estranged piece, a surplus, between the two halves of this film, which is the void which, by its incontinence, binds and propels them. What else could this void be than El Topo's *hijo*? Abandoned at the start and the last remnant at the end, El Topo's son is the absence unconscious and repressed, as is the order of monks to which he belongs: the religious backdrop for Jodorowsky's Eastern excursions.

In short: the antinomies of this film are its solution, to see the son is death, and to see the sun is to be blinded.

Chapter 4

The Ontology of the Symbolic Order

As demonstrated in *Cringe Comedy Inaction*, the symbolic order, despite initial semblances, evades the structure of a sociological sheaf (at least in any useful sense). This is our first clue that the primary obstacle to understanding the symbolic order is an ontological one. Luckily, this matter has already been the subject of much discussion.

First, let us recall the paradox that the symbolic order can contain that which is merely believed by its constituents *to be within the symbolic order itself*. This circularity is the key to recognizing that the symbolic order is defined, not by presence, but by a *fundamental lack*, or void. This is, to put it in Lacanian terms, the barred Other.

If we are to consider the symbolic order as being a void or lack, then the natural question is to identify the positive support (or symptom) residing within this void. Here we can refer to the discussion of Žižek's parallel between Marx and Freud above; just as the fundamental lack of a commodity is supported by its "form,"

$V(t)$, so the symbolic order is ordered by its $V(t, N)$.

Of course, we should not confuse this void for nothingness. It is the void that shapes the symptom. Consider the appeal of expensive bottled water; the success of this product depends entirely on the form of the bottle. This reliance on form to evoke something in the consumer is indicative of the void in the bottle of water itself: the thing in itself that is more than itself. However, just because this form signifies the void of the water bottle does *not* mean that the design of the bottle can be arbitrary: rather it is shaped by this void.

This leads us to an intriguing paradox; the symbolic order is not structured as a sociological sheaf, but the symptom of the symbolic order, $V(t, N)$, is structured as a sociological sheaf. This can be explained by the dual relationship between the symbolic order and $V(t, N)$; the symbolic order structures activity, but is nothing more than the representation of the symbolic order within the minds of its constituents (which, in turn, means that the symbolic order is nothing more than an emergent property of $V(t)$). Like so many social phenomena, this can be visualized as two mirrors *vis-a-vis*.

By this shift of focus from the symbolic order to its symptom, we change perspective, via a sort of reflection, or inversion, from a geometrically intractable, even fractal, problem, to one with more regularity (namely, the sociological sheaf). For instance, with regard to commodities, we might phrase our approach in this way: do not analyze commodities by determining their place within the symbolic order, but determine the symbolic order by the presence of commodities.

4.1 Infinite Reflection *or* Kyrie

In *The Sociological Sheaf*, we dealt with problems of infinite reflection: the mutual simulation of people and television characters

and the self-simulation induced by verbalization. With both of these examples, the problem of the convergent tendencies of these processes was largely solved by the notion of $V(t)$, which is, by definition, self-propagating. We can see now that this is another instance of the ability of the symptom to flatten problems of geometric complexity.

As noted in the previous discussion, however, there is no reason to assume that the meaning of Text supervenes on the Text: in fact, merely reading a poem twice lends new meaning to the second reading. This is where we enter, again, the realm of the symbolic order, since this issue is not explained by the $V(t)$.

As suggested by this example of repetition, it is self-referentiality that returns us to the frustrating realm of the symbolic order. In fact, that is the defining feature of the symbolic order, its representation of its own lack. This hints at the effect of repetition on meaning: the subsequent iterations refer not to the meaning of the preceding ones, but to the lack of meaning. This is the source of the vampiric nature of nostalgia; by resurrecting dead fashion trends, we make them, not alive, but *undead*. Just as the zombie of a loved one makes a mockery of the meaninglessness of her form, so does the ritual of adorning the corpses of dead Forms make a mockery of their meaninglessness.

One may consider the hypothetical "discourse theory of art" proposed earlier in light of this recognition: it is the repetition of the artwork itself, as well as the repetition of the discourse surrounding it, which is to be avoided. If the latter occurs, but not the former, then the artwork itself no longer is a symptom of the symbolic order, but rather becomes a constituent of the *symbolic order itself*. This can be seen in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, which primarily refers to itself, because it is the most significant thing that it can refer to! To avoid this fate, then, is not to be more meaningful, but to better obscure the fact that there is no meaning. This is the artistic equivalent of Alenka Zupancic's interpretation of the Christian censorship of the sexual (it is not the truth of sexuality

that is censored, but the epistemo-ontological gap) [19]. Discursive inexhaustibility, then, is just another way to describe an effective concealment of meaninglessness.

Returning to the question of the convergence of $V(t)$ in general, we can see that it is naive to assume that the self-propagation of $V(t)$ guarantees convergences: rather, we can, empirically, see that, in general, it does not. Our ontology of the symbolic order, however, provides exactly the explanation for why this does not occur: the symbolic order, as the space which shapes $V(t)$, is not exhausted by $V(t)$. That is to say, there is always space for a Viral Form outside of the present symptom.

The question, then, is how we identify what Viral Forms may occupy this space in addition to the current symptom. The most obvious way to do this is to identify the signifier of the signifier of the lack, which, taken without much subtlety, would yield us a theory similar to a naive pseudo-Hegelian synthesis. To give an example of this very abstract concept, consider the packaging of beers such as Stella Artois. Like with expensive bottled water, it is the packaging that is the symptom, the source of surplus-value. For this reason, it is the packaging that signifies the lack in the product itself. The most notable feature of the packaging of Stella Artois and many of its kin is that the top of each bottle is covered by a pretty white garment. This is the signifier of the signifier of the lack; deflowering the bottle by removing this dressing “spoils” the intangible perfection of the beer. Whatever one may think of the beer after it has been undressed is mostly irrelevant. That is also the important distinction between this foreskin symbol and the opening of a bottle of Coca-Cola: only the former is discarded, and this is what makes it a tangible signifier of the signifier of the lack. The space for new beers, then, begins with the replacement of this foreskin with a new one.

Moreover, such an introduction of a new Viral Form to the symptom of the symbolic order has the effect of warping the symbolic order itself. To continue the spatial analogy: the only matter

that can exist is that which can be embedded in space-time, but matter itself warps space-time. Therefore, any real ability to expect a convergence of symptoms would require an ability to account for the way the symptom warps the symbolic order.

It should be intuitively clear that this is not possible, and for reasons that are not difficult to see: should such a prediction exist, that prediction would itself warp the symbolic order. One can compare this to the idea of economic predictions: any sufficiently predictive theory will thwart itself by its very existence. This inability to make sufficient predictions about the future of symptoms may disappoint the reader, since, in the earlier discussion of infinite reflection in *The Sociological Sheaf*, we made it seem like a tractable problem. Hopefully the reader is aware that this process mirrors the discursive process.

4.2 Ecology and Analysis

A good conceptual framework aims for more than descriptive merit: a good framework, even as no more than a byproduct of better understanding, should aid practical endeavor. There is certainly no harm in investigating outright the practical applicability of a framework.

Since our subject is the social, we are rightly tempted, given the psychoanalytic bent of this text, to consider the generalization of the analysand. This idea was already implicit in the diction of the discussion of social "symptoms." What better example of a potential area of inquiry, then, than ecology? Ecological issues span time and space, pose important ontological and epistemological questions, and intersect the social in various dimensions and registers.

A first criticism of this approach would be the ontological argument associated with thinkers such as Graham Harman: ecological issues require an ontology that does not rely on the subject.

There are two ways to interpret this argument. Firstly, we could interpret it as being purely theoretical: that we cannot properly discuss ecological issues without an “objective” ontology. This interpretation, however, fails to capture the urgency of the matter: the biggest ecological issue is a practical one, not a theoretical one. This brings us to the second possible interpretation, then, which is that the practical and theoretical issues are united in that notions of subjectivity have so thoroughly permeated culture that there is a widespread passivity bred from ontological issues (which seems like little more than a philosopher’s daydream) or that the presentation of ecological issues to the public suffers from a lack of appropriate language because of the ontological issues. This latter point misunderstands the process of analysis: treatment is not simply a matter of telling the patient the truth, and technical theoretical matters such as ontology are very unlikely to enter the discourse.

In fact, the subjective lens of analysis might actually help to provide a pragmatic perspective to ecological problems, as exemplified by this (simple) realization that theoretical issues should not be in the public eye: the task when effecting change is to occupy the locus of the one presumed to know and to offer a symbolic framing of the issue from within the symbolic order of the group concerned.

There is another potential criticism of the applicability of the analytic method to social effect: that the goal is not simply to identify and eliminate symptoms (e.g. the positive support of a void), but to induce them. For example, “the concept masculinity is nothing but a symptom” is an incredibly poor call to arms, whereas a new concept of masculinity could be mobilized to real effect. This, of course, is simply a misunderstanding of analysis akin to the popular opinion on deconstruction; rather, analysis *is precisely* a process of mobilizing the symbolic. (This is the reason why attempts to dismiss Lacan as a charlatan fall flat: the analyst is necessarily a charlatan insofar as the role of an analyst is to be

the person presumed to know, so calling Lacan a talented charlatan should only pique our interest in his analysis.)

Having dealt with these preliminary concerns, we must still build a positive model for actually performing such an analysis. As mentioned in the previous discussion on social symptoms, it is best to begin with symptoms rather than the symbolic order, since their geometric properties make them amenable to investigation. In the same discussion we indicated that identifying a signifier of the signifier of the lack is often a useful first step to mobilizing the symptom.

However, it is not obvious that this procedure has widespread applicability. Ecology is an obvious example of this: while the discourse surrounding ecology is certainly symptomatic, this discourse is far from being the cause of ecological issues. Rather, ecological issues arise merely as a byproduct of other behavior, and this cuts across nearly all aspects of human behavior. This is an example of a challenge the reader should be familiar with by this point: geometric complexity. Because ecological issues intersect with behavior in complex ways, its analysis presents a serious obstacle.

Furthermore, ecological issues are a notable example of a more general obstacle of a structural lack of accountability. More cynically, one could say that the hammer of democratic nations is individual accountability, but that the issues arising from global capitalism are nothing like nails. This is a potent example of how a social problem that may initially present itself as evading analysis by being an issue of lack rather than presence (a lack of accountability in this case) proves to be an issue of presence instead (the discourse of accountability).

This example provides a model for how the more general geometric complexity of ecological issues can be managed. Firstly, one should consider reducing the scope of analysis from "ecology" to something more manageable, because ecology issues (despite ecology's notorious interconnectedness), is a composite is-

sue. More specifically, one should choose the smallest possible subset that is not engaged in a process of mutual feedback with its complement. This mirrors how one would attempt to describe the ecological to begin with:

1. Define the registers of analysis (e.g. the food web).
2. Delineate the smallest possible space that does not interact significantly in these registers with the outside (e.g. a pond).

This is, of course, not a foolproof way to reduce complexity, but is an accurate enough heuristic to be very useful. One frequently encounters the same procedure in everyday life: when frustrated with our relationships, we narrow our area of inquiry to the irreducible complexity to the relevant registers, excluding factors such as diet and interior decorating from consideration, even though both of these matters can have measurable psychological effects.

4.3 The Primacy of the Symptom

Despite the title of this chapter being *The Ontology of the Symbolic Order*, our focus has almost entirely shifted to the symptom. Our initial motivation for this was purely pragmatic: symptoms have a geometry that coincides nicely with the geometry of the social. However, if mathematics teaches us anything, it is that the simple tends to be more than pragmatic. For this reason, we should consider whether there are more reasons to focus our attention on the symptom.

Firstly, we can notice that the symbolic order refers, above all, to the reality of behavior, rather than its verbalization, and the reality of behavior is symptomatic. Freud chooses to open *Civilization and Its Discontents* with a variant of this tension:

It is impossible to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurement - that they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate what is of true value in life. And yet, in making any general judgement of this sort, we are in danger of forgetting how variegated the human world and its mental life are. There are a few men from whom their contemporaries do not withhold admiration, although their greatness rests on attributes and achievements which are completely foreign to the aims and ideals of the multitude. One might easily be inclined to suppose that it is after all only a minority which appreciates these great men, while the large majority cares nothing for them. But things are probably not as simple as that, thanks to the discrepancies between people's thoughts and their actions, and to the diversity of their wishful impulses.[5]

The discrepancy here seems to be one of registers; the Imaginary representation of the Symbolic is, by necessity, divergent from the original.

We might begin by asking what an investigation of the symbolic order would look like without the psychoanalytic symptom (as distinguished from the social symptom defined above). Meditating on this, we find that it would look like the animal kingdom: human society without symptoms is a human society without a positive support for the lack of their being, i.e. animals. In this way, in ridding ourselves of the symptom, we rid ourselves of the symbolic as well.

We might also ask what an investigation of the symbolic order would look like without the social symptom (which, remember, is $V(t)$). This is, to be blunt, not a symbolic order at all, because there is no order without "social patterns."

These reflections are an indication that modelling in our analysis the symbolic order after the symptoms may be, not just a practical choice, but reflective of the nature of the symbolic order. Take as an example the example of the scandal where no single person is scandalized; the symbolic order is constructed from the Imaginary, which is constructed from the identification of the social symptom (being / feigning being scandalized). While this may appear circular, keep in mind that the symbolic order is defined in terms of behavior, and that behavior that is not symptomatic is irrelevant to the symbolic order.

This fits with our intuition regarding the symbolic order as the barred Other: the symbolic order, being the very void that shapes the symptoms, is comprehensible only through its symptoms.

Consider the infamous question “what is my purpose?” The first thing we notice is that this question is defined by a fundamental lack of an adequate answer. However, this lack does not exist in one’s isolated self. Rather, the lack is induced by the entry of the Symbolic, i.e. the question itself. Of course, every lack corresponds to a symptom, so in this case we can identify symptoms such as “my purpose is to enact the will of God.” This answer acts as the positive support for the void introduced by the Symbolic. Of course, and this point bears repeating, the symptom is not arbitrary, but is necessarily something contoured by the shape of the void. In this example, what this means is that even if the answer “my purpose is to enact the will of God” is false (which it is), we cannot conclude that any answer replace it. To put it bluntly, this answer is a right-wrong, whereas the answer “my purpose is to create a 10-tined fork” is wrong-wrong. The next point of interest is identifying the signifier of the signifier of the lack. This is very easy to identify in this case; it is original sin. Original sin points directly to the gap in this symptom: it is the gap between the design of Man and the function of Man. In other words, original sin makes explicit the paradox of this account of Man’s purpose as something akin to declaring the purpose of a fork to be to aid in

eating soup.

We might also consider the Modern situation, in which questions such as “what is my purpose” find themselves empty after the symptom is rejected (God’s death). This phenomenon in general, which is likely more prevalent in the analysis of the social symptom than the psychic, is a *vestigial lack*, appearing to outlive any positive support. If, as we claim, every lack corresponds to a symptom, then this appearance must be refuted. Before finding a positive support for this vestigial lack, it is necessary to understand the mechanism that propagates this lack, both as a social and a psychic phenomenon.

The social mechanism of this vestigial lack can be easily identified by referring to the formula $V(t)$ is the symptom. From this perspective (and without regard for nuance), we can see a shift from the pre-modern $V(t)$ apropos of Man’s purpose as discourse regarding the will of God to the modern $V(t)$ as existentialist discourse. Therefore, we can conclude that the symbolic order (being, as posited earlier, constructed from symptoms), has changed very little, because the new discourse fills the gap left by the old. From this we can draw a more general realization that negation, because it does not add to the symbolic order, but merely performs a reversal, has relatively little effect on it. This may seem surprising, since negation is a ubiquitous discursive tool, but it is simply a consequence of the construction of the symbolic order from the Imaginary. Like the one presumed to be scandalized in the earlier example, negating the existence of God still implies the existence of *one presumed to believe*, which in turn implies the lingering presence of God in the symbolic order (even if there are no adherents left). It is no coincidence that the mechanism of action is the same for the individual (in fact this is a direct consequence of the geometric properties of the symptom). This phenomenon is perhaps best understood in the form of teenage rebellion: in rejecting the discourse of the parent, they are still bound by this discourse (even if the parent secretly admires the exhibition of independence). The

teenager, then, is not only far from being asymptomatic, but has changed very little of their internal symbolic order.

Of course, this is not to say that there is no change in the barred Other when there is a change in the symptom, and this must be accounted for in our model. This may seem beyond reconciliation with our analogy: that the lack is the space that curves the symptom. However, this analogy actually provides the answer when we relate it to the findings of general relativity; just as matter curves space-time that it is embedded in, the symptom curves the lack that it is embedded in. This provides an explanation for the effect of phenomena described by, e.g., interpellation and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: the symptom shapes the subject, even if it is only to a small degree.

4.4 A Return to Art

After the speculative discussion of art's relationship to discourse, the reader may be interested in a more grounded discussion of the subject matter, which certainly seems warranted given that the theoretical tools available now are more sophisticated.

First we consider the proposition that art's value exists independently of humanity. Put another way, that art has the property of being valued (by humans) even if it there were no humans to experience it. This proposition has some intuitive appeal; the last human on Earth would be *inhuman* to destroy art. Secondly, we can consider the proposition that art does not motivate its audience. For example, this can be used to explain the difference between advertising and art.

The first question we would like to consider is whether the second proposition follows from the first. While this may appear to be the case at first glance, this is easily refuted by appealing to Love. Love has the property that the lover values the beloved in themselves, thereby satisfying the first proposition. Yet this aes-

thetic appraisal of the beloved as an end-in-herself, rather than being unmotivating, is a powerful and potentially destructive force. Therefore, we might be led to suspect that the validity of the first proposition precludes the validity of the second proposition.

However, art, while one could claim it has motivating power, has nowhere near the motivating power of love. Our first suspicion, then, should be that the difference may be a matter of magnitude. To understand this relationship, consider the lack induced by the aesthetic appraisal of both art and the beloved; the object worthy of being an end-in-themselves is not just the finite instantiation of the object. The lover is not wholly blind to the flaws of the beloved, contrary to common wisdom. Rather, the lover, rightly, recognizes that the flawed person is not the *true* beloved. The *true* object of love is something in the beloved that is more than herself.¹

This gap introduced by aesthetic appraisal is nothing more than another instance of a lack induced by the entry of the signifier into the object. The implication of this, then, (in a turn which, by this point, should not take the reader by surprise) is that the (real) object of love (i.e. the lover's answer to the eternal question "why do you love me?") is the symptom of this lack. What is (relatively) unique about love is that it is the site of a short-circuit; because the question "why do you love me?" is unanswerable, the symptom is nothing more than an empty sign pointing to its own emptiness. In everyday terms, Love is only Love if it is ineffable. (This is the analysis, albeit in more generality, by Alenka

¹Of course, it still must be in the beloved herself, a point best demonstrated in the form of a joke.

A wife found Love Potion 7 in her husband's bag. When he came home from work, she was waiting for him, crying. "Have you been using it on a coworker? Or worse, on me?" Her husband just laughed: "No, honey, I would never do something like that. I swear I have only been self-medicating!"

Zupancic in *What IS Sex?*.) However, this short-circuit is not really unique to the love-symptom; it is nothing more than the signifier of the signifier of the lack, which we have already identified in other symptoms. What is unique, however, is the lack of anything in the symptom apart from this short-circuit.

This language is found also in Derrida's piece "On Forgiveness":

...yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that calls for forgiveness? If one is only prepared to forgive what appears forgivable, what the church calls 'venial sin', then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear.[2]

Cannot the same be said of Love? That it is only Love if its object is not worthy of Love?

Chapter 5

Reversing...

5.1 ...the Fantasy *or* Parallax

Our discussion of Love has ignored an important question: if the object of love is not the beloved, then what is the outcome for the beloved under the torrent of Love?

The *Nausicaa* chapter of *Ulysses* provides a useful model for describing the relationship between the fantasizer and the object of fantasy; it begins, told in a parody romantic style, from the perspective of the young Gerty MacDowell, sitting on the rocks along the Sandymount shore, as she finds herself flattered by the gaze of an onlooker. While her friends flit about the rocks with children and a baby, Gerty remains in repose, a reclining nude. After being hinted at throughout, it is revealed in a post-orgasmic twist that the onlooker, Leopold Bloom, is the true narrator, speaking through and for Gerty MacDowell. In a second twist, as she walks away, Bloom realizes that she has a limp, and is left to conclude "Thought something was wrong by the cut of her jib. Jilted beauty. A defect is ten times worse in a woman...Hot little devil all the same...Curiosity like a nun or a negress or a girl

with glasses (Ulysses 368).” What is fascinating about this portrayal of lust is that it must be passed through fantasy. This is why it is crucial that, for Bloom, Gerty MacDowell’s psyche must be cloyingly florid enough to open with such a sentence as “The summer evening had begun to fold the world in its mysterious embrace.”[7] For Gerty to satisfy her symbolic function, her subjectiveness must be sacrificed to, and erased for, the fantasy. This effect also lends her an unclear status: is she a victim, participant, or both? It is also significant that the style of this chapter, and the filter through which the fantasy is constructed, is undoubtedly literary. That is to say, that the fantasy is a certain kind of imposition of the Symbolic (a pseudo-Lacanian formula: fantasy is the discourse of the Other). This erasure of subjectivity (we hesitate to substitute the term “objectivization”) is also present to a similar effect in *Lolita* to a similar effect. What can we learn from the fact that, for Bloom, a romantic novel is pornography *par excellence* (even as he carries pornography in his pocket)? It is that it is not the un-human, or de-humanized, or animalized creature that is the object of erasure by preventing identification; it is the subject that promotes identification. Does not sadism require empathy?

Franz Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” shares this theme of the sacrificial aspect of fantasy, the protagonist of which, in pursuit of a *jouissance* derived from the appreciation of his “art” (fasting), eventually meets his end in the expected way, and without an audience. A similar fate is met by the officer in “In the Penal Colony” and, curiously, both characters appeal, not to personal well-being, pleasure, or morality even, but to the preservation of tradition. The hunger artist’s story begins with: “In recent decades there has been a marked decline in the public’s interest in professional fasting.”[8] *The Metamorphosis* differs from these stories in that the sacrifice (appears, at least) to succeed, when Gregor Samsa, who sees himself as sacrificing his happiness for the well-being of his family (and specifically to pay for his sister to study violin at the Conservatory), discovers that is actually his death that they need

to be free.

What can we make from the variations on this theme? It is the aggressive, destructive nature of desire, and of the fantasy needed to mediate that desire. For *l'objet*, Pynchon's "V.," sacrifice is necessary, whether it be self (the artist), or other (Lolita). Furthermore, the male fantasy often requires the erasure of the female subject, a phenomenon made possible only because "there is nothing in woman that is not integrated into the symbolic [lending possibility to the erasure] and, as such, woman resists full integration into the Symbolic [making her an object of mystery]. We can also find in these Kafka pieces (and with this formula) the (obvious) answer to the struggles of the artist; it is the act of suffering that brings *jouissance*. "I would like to die and watch the others crying over me." [9]

If we consider magic to be a fantasy of the same structure, then we might ask what it sacrifices. To begin to answer this, we must first bring our attention back to a distinction mentioned earlier: while the magic Claude Levi-Strauss describes functions to resolve antinomies, New Age magic introduces them. The second category can be subsumed into the first if we conjecture that it introduces some antinomies in order to resolve others. Firstly, the scars of antinomy serve, like the hunger artist's fasted body, to produce a spectacle. Is it a surprise that Karl Ove Knausgaard, because (in spite of?) in the face of rejection from the woman he desired, he "grabbed the glass on the sink and hurled it at the wall," using the shards to cut his face? The wounds ("I apologize for this.") [11] announces the dissolution of a contradiction (Knausgaard's narcissism *vis-a-vis* his rejection by Linda in favor of a friend).

In moving from the individual to the social, we can preserve the basic structure of our results, but it is difficult to maintain rigor. Is the symptom the basis for a collective *jouissance*? In keeping in line with the methodology proposed above, we need, at first, examine only the symbolic form of the phenomenon itself.

The confusion regarding the “flat earth” phenomenon comes from an apparent contradiction between its form and content; it claims to be an empirical, revolutionary return to the origins of science, yet its adherents must reject their sensory experience to subscribe to it. The answer to this dilemma is that we must examine, in the spirit of the Viral, this content as merely further Form, and we must not trust the conscious verbalizations therefrom, since, as expounded on above, social phenomena are unconscious. Then how else can we interpret this phenomenon but as the result of a need to reclaim the (alleged) promise of science; to provide, from first principles, a system for understanding the world? The humor resides in the fact that the elusive, circling discourse of “flat earthers” is not qualitatively different from scientific discourse. If scientific theories were abandoned when proven false, then where would general relativity be?

It remains to be seen what awaits us after traversing the flat earth fantasy. Leopold Bloom’s sudden fall to lame, perverted Earth; the beetle that awaits Knausgaard when he sodomizes a glass bottle found in the woods.[10] Perhaps we should turn to Hegel for the answer of the dialectic sting at the end of the social fantasy.

Or perhaps we can turn our discussion inwards. If we apologize here for the unnecessary number examples used for (at the expense of) the argument presented, then can we avoid the charge of vanity? The answer is firmly negative, since such an apology can be read merely as, to use David Foster Wallace’s term, second-order vanity, viz. the fear of being seen as vain. [15] In this way, the discursivity of vanity exhibits an absolute, childlike logic. Like a Chinese finger trap, any attempt at resistance only drags the victim further in. This is the property of Love that we all know and love: that our unknowing Love cannot be swayed by knowing more. In other words, love has two sides: epistemological impossibility and epistemological irrelevance. While we could move here to classify this as the “for itself,” we may be able to gain more

from staying with the form alone.

This discursive property is also the property of racism, Love, “flat earthers”, etc. As Žižek proclaims, “*fantasy is a means for an ideology to take into account its own failure in advance.*” [17] Does this not describe, just as well, the attitude of the unbelieving horoscope reader? It produces an apparent antinomy (I act as if I believe but do not), but only to resolve another antinomy (I read horoscopes but they do not work). What is curious about this is that the antinomy being covered up by the behavior is *internal* to the behavior, leaving us with a temporal paradox. This paradox resolves itself from a shift in perspective: the behavior itself produces antinomies, so the discourse surrounding the behavior takes on antinomies to resolve those internal to the behavior. Therefore the epistemological invariance of this discourse is nothing but an inoculation against the Viral, the concept introduced much earlier, meant to preserve the behavior. This is why, when Leopold Bloom is no longer fantasizing about Gerty MacDowell, the “romantic novel” discourse is dismissed.

The release of Leopold Bloom’s psychic tension through his encounter with Gerty MacDowell provides a general model for *jouissance* that we might seek to apply in other ways: for instance, the parallactic jealousy of Bloom (spatially and temporally removed from his wife’s unfaithfulness). We have already noted the odd temporal properties of ideology, so it is not such a leap to consider jealousy as a similar phenomenon (perhaps a cuckold’s *Fort-Da?*), functioning to dissolve a temporal gap between the perception and consummation of the act.

We can risk here an analogy with finance; the impossibility of the time-value of money makes itself felt through periodic credit disasters. Similarly, it is not the object of Molly’s unfaithfulness that haunts *Ulysses*, but rather the subject’s foreknowledge. The rebate embodies this same temporal void; a rebate would only be a preferable means of selling a product (as opposed to including the rebate in the price) if there is some excess introduced by the rebate

but not accounted for in its price. Like a middleman's kickbacks or a Pharmacy Benefit Manager's collection of rebates, this surplus attains itself in an intermediate stage between the writing of the check and its use, between the ascription of a price to a product and its arrival in the hands of the consumer. Is it a step too far to consider this the psychoanalytic response to the asexual: that the attribution of the term to oneself to dissolve antinomies, despite the gap introduced by the term itself, is not just inherently sexual, but even the defining feature of sex itself?

What is challenging in the analysis of the social fantasy is that this "psychological middleman" is not necessarily the same for its subjects; we have already examined how the Symbolic does not have the desirable geometric properties of a sheaf. Although it may seem that we must then result to individual accounts to explain the Social Fantasy, the internal properties identified above do provide a start. The Fantasy requires its own self-negation to be sustained; the borrowing of money would not survive without accounting for its own lack (interest), nor would Donald Trump be president (the election will be rigged, the establishment does not want him to succeed, etc.). All of these Fantasies are, above all else, "unfalsifiable." (Of course, there is no qualitative difference between this and other social phenomena, e.g. humanism). The difference, then, is the same one that distinguishes shamanism from "proper religion" (demonstrated in *El Topo*): one can either fight endlessly to resolve antinomies, or can account for them from the start

5.2 Ab Nihil or Metempsychosis

The obverse side of passive parallax is active deferral, as can be seen in the *Radiohead* song *Jigsaw Falling Into Place*, which uses the word "before" a number of times:

Before the night owl

Before the animal noises
 Closed circuit cameras
 Before you're comatose.
 Before you run away from me
 Before you're lost between the notes...

What this song attributes to the sexual dimension must, if we are to explain oppositional structure *in general* as of the same kind, be attributed to much more. That is to say, that we should expect to find deferral as a quality of the oppositional structures we are investigating. We can find this relationship by passing through the sexual example, where the object of deferral is *la petite mort*, to the example of the living being, where the object of deferral is *la gros mort*. We can even take this further and speculate that attempts at achieving an impossible *jouissance* may be "ranked" by the magnitude of their deathward-vector: is not the death of Kafka's hunger artist, or the efficacy of psychedelics in helping dying patients cope, the trace of *jouissance*?

Like the Viral life is a deferral of death, $V(t)$ is a deferral, a return of the repressed, of death mediated through the symbolic. This is clearly demonstrated in Steven Wilson's album *Hand. Cannot. Erase*. It tells a story inspired by Joyce Carol Vincent, whose body remained, unnoticed, in her London apartment for two years after her death. The poignant track "Routine" describes the character's means of coping with the death of her children:

And keep making beds and keep the cat fed. Open the window, let the air in. And keep the house clean and keep the routine. Paintings they made still stuck to the fridge.

We have here the aforementioned triad: her routine circulates around the void produced by the death of her children, but this

death itself is only an intermediary for the real object of deferral, her own death. Like how the infinite variety of sex derives from its deferral, the colors of life derive from the deferral of death. One can even attempt to view artistic merit through this lens; Žižek contrasts Mozart's "musical *decency*," his "thwarted melodic culmination" with romantic "embarrassing excesses (Incontinence of the Void 84-85)." This dialectic is reversed in the transition from classic rock to punk; the "slow burn" deferral of beauty that characterizes classic rock (e.g. "Stairway to Heaven" or "November Rain" or "Behind Blue Eyes") is replaced by an excess of ugliness (e.g. "Big Strong Boss" on the Swans album *Filth*), but these two approaches are synthesized in the post-hardcore use of tension (e.g. At the Drive-In "One Armed Scissor" or Coheed and Cambria's "Delirium Trigger").

James Joyce's use of *metempsychosis*, the association of his characters with mythological or canonical literary characters, is also the "return of the repressed." Gerty MacDowell is simultaneously a transmigration of the soul of a character from some romance novel, real or imaginary, echoing in Bloom's mind, and a stand-in for Molly (the repressed). We might call this schema "the return *and* the repressed."

If it is true that metaphysical systems can be summarized in numbers, then perhaps this one can be summarized in this way: none is one and one is two. In other words, the lack (e.g. death) is itself an entity (none is one), and that which produced by the incontinence of this void is necessarily oppositional (one is two).

This is also why Joyce's "abnihilation of the etym" seems like an uncanny prediction; the etym (viz. the Word) is the two (the oppositional structure) from (ab) and circulating the void (nihil, the Barred Other) which is, itself, only a substitute for death. So then it is no coincidence that Joyce associates the abnihilation of the etym, and the annihilation of the atom, with death. Is it any coincidence that the atomic warfare is the void around which foreign policy circulates, and the holocaust the void around which

domestic policy circulates? Joyce makes (atemporally) the point hinted at here: if the Renaissance is defined by a return to classicism, then it is not even that the dropping of the atomic bomb marks the end of the Renaissance, the new foundation for society, but it is that the “abnihilation of the etym” displaces “empyrean Raum.”[6]

5.3 $V(t)$ in Anthropology

Our exhortation to use $V(t)$ as the starting-point for analysis seems, at best, banal, given that $V(t)$ roughly corresponds to “social phenomena.” This banality should indicate that this is not the first time something of the kind has been proposed. Claude Levi-Strauss begins *Structural Anthropology* with issues of this kind, quoting E. B. Tylor as stating:

The bow and arrow is a species, the habit of flattening children’s skulls is a species, the practice of reckoning numbers by tens is a species. The geographical distribution of these things, and their transmission from region to region, have to be studied as the naturalist studies the geography of his botanical and zoological species.[14]

This passage undoubtedly shares a certain spirit with our program, but Levi-Strauss is quick to refute the analogy it postulates: “We cannot classify under the same rubric the custom of killing the old for economic reasons and that of hastening their entrance into the joys of the other world.”[14] This refutation is essentially bound to the aspirations of anthropology, but certainly we must be cautious to commit the historical fallacy Levi-Strauss describes (of attributing to two identical Forms a common origin).

Levi-Strauss’s argument is a geometric one: that adding the temporal dimension does not make the sociological sheaf $V(\textit{senicide})$

a connected space. In less mathematical terms: there is no common society, at any point in time, that can connect these two phenomena.

The similarity between E. B. Tylor's words and our own gives us a second imperative: to identify the extent to which our program converges with or diverges from anthropology. At this point, we must give more thought to the title of this text. One might expect that, if *Social Geometry* indicates a field of study, then it should be a field of geometry through a sociological lens, but this would be absurd. Conversely, one might expect this text to be *Geometric Sociology*, but the approach of this text is too general to be classified as a sub-field of sociology. There is no paradox here: *Social Geometry* is not a field of study. Furthermore, it is not a phenomenon, a set of phenomena, nor a set of claims as to the nature of phenomena. *Social Geometry* refers to an alignment between social disciplines and phenomena when viewed from a specific geometric perspective. (In this way, *Social Geometry* is in the register of the Imaginary.) Like the geometric interpretation of Levi-Strauss's argument, then, we see that the relationship between the "program" of *Social Geometry* and anthropology is one of alignment. [14]

It is important to note that structural analysis produces, not the pattern of a wave, if we consider symbolic structures as analogous to waves, but the collision of two waves. For example, analysis of the myth of Oedipus requires first a description of the pattern that defines the myth of Oedipus (in order to resolve, for instance, whether Freud's description of the Oedipus complex is another telling of the myth). The identification of this pattern, of course, relies, the same as for a natural scientist, the (largely symbolic) pattern-recognizing capabilities of the observer, landing us firmly in the territory of intersubjectivity. In the same way, an identification of a sociological sheaf (e.g., some $V(t)$), is necessarily intersubjective. For this reason it would be misleading to call our approach a model; if anything, it is a metamodel. This raises the question: what is the benefit of this metamodel? The benefit lies in its ho-

mogeneity at different “resolutions.” (This can be contrasted with the *lysis* of traditional ontologies.) The result of this homogeneity is, not just a simplified metamodel that often finds itself on the right side of the law of parsimony, but a scalability akin to that of functional programming; as social structures become vastly more complex, a model that is homogeneous at different resolutions becomes not just aesthetically valuable, but pragmatically necessary.

5.4 The Symbolic Order of the Ontology

The fundamental axiom of culture is that a super-culture is less than a sub-culture; the larger the scope, the smaller the (in some way shared) entity. This is reminiscent of Timothy Morton’s word “*subscendence*,” viz. that the whole is less than the sum of its parts. This reason for this becomes clear when we view objects, as networks of actors, as being a more general case of social structures, as networks of people. That is to say, the ontological rule implies the cultural. There then arises the question of to what extent we may apply this “social geometric” perspective to ontological studies. The difference between a sociological sheaf and an ontological object is that the latter does not necessarily need to satisfy the axiom of the former. We may then interpret the sheaf, with its local-global, or gluing, axiom, as an ontological object that is “consistent between resolutions.” Remember that sociological sheafs are data attached to an object, so a sheaf on an object is a collection of data on the object. Therefore the sheaf itself is empirical-linguistic, not ontological, but the nature of the sheaf is affected by the ontological.

The difficulty of distinguishing ontological from semantic statements (resulting from the impossibility of completely “accessing” the object) can now be seen to be the source of the intersubjective nature of the identification of sociological sheaves. This phenomenon opens a space for interesting, subversive analyses of

common objects.

Consider using “uniformity” as the basis for a sheaf on a painting. The painting is split down the half, with two different colors in each half, and, conveniently, the this is the covering set used for the sheaf. That is to say, that the left half of the painting is assigned the datum “true” for being uniform, and the right is as well. Then the gluing axiom yields the datum “true” for the entire painting, which contradicts the split of the painting into two colors.

This paradox is resolved by realizing that the failure is not in uniformity, but in the fact that the *interaction* (the edge) of the *actors* (the vertices) “left-half” and “right-half” was missing, so the covering set, while it may have geometrically, or materially, covered the painting, did not cover its interactions (as perceived by the subject). For this reason, we must remember, not only the subjectivity of the entire procedure, but also the fact the data are assigned not to sub-objects but “sub-networks”.

Is there any reason in attempting to overlay sheaves on (non-social) objects? The same geometrical advantages found in the social examples are still advantages in other domains, but it is not clear whether the dissection of objects with this aim in mind would actually result in greater understanding. What does it mean to reinterpret an objects as a sheaf? Perhaps the simplest example comes in the problem of defining a tree; the problem of finding the data of Tree-ness that determines the Tree-ness of the whole tree initially seems impossible, since the tree is composed of heterogeneous parts, but this problem is not actually so intractable (the data is genetic).

5.5 The Cyborg Self *or* Kyrie

If the Lacanian formula “the super-ego is the discourse of the other” holds, then it is no surprise that Sigmund Freud devoted much of

Civilization and its Discontents to the subject of guilt (a psychoanalytic artifact if there ever was one):

A great change takes place only when the authority is internalized through the establishment of a super-ego. The phenomena of conscience then reach a higher stage. Actually, it is not until now that we should speak of conscience or a sense of guilt. At this point, too, the fear of being found out comes to an end; the distinction, moreover, between doing something bad and wishing to do it disappears entirely, since nothing can be hidden from the super-ego, not even thoughts.[5]

Freud's point here is simply that the development of a conscience requires internalizing this "discourse of the other" so that what was once social anxiety becomes a conflict purely in the relationship of the individual to herself. This account seems to capture the intuitive understanding of the conscience, but it is difficult to reconcile with American social prescriptions.

Before completing our analysis of Freud's account of guilt, we must first consult his account of sublimation apropos of the social:

Taboos, laws and customs impose...restrictions, which affect both men and women...Here, as we already know, civilization is obeying the laws of economic necessity, since a large amount of the psychical energy which it uses for its own purposes has to be withdrawn from sexuality [through sublimation]. In this respect civilization behaves toward sexuality as a people or a stratum of its population does which has subjected another one to its exploitation.[5]

Of course, Western culture has, since Freud's time, widely embraced permissivity in the sexual realm and more generally. If we

are to be properly cynical, then we should be obliged to ask what benefit to the propagation of Western society (or as Freud calls it, civilization) is, as opposed to merely assuming that this liberation is in the name of "progress." If the cost to society incurred by permissivity is a reduction in productivity as a result of sublimatory activity, then clearly the benefit lies in the resultant passivity of a population whose urges are indulged and thereby subdued. (To inquire as to the economic viability of such a program, one must turn their investigation to the energy industry.)

Complicating matters is an ideological transmutation that has taken place in this permissivity: the shift from a permissivity of "you *can* do what you want" to "you *should* do what you want." This change can be observed across the spectrum of the contentious topics in American politics from abortion (abortion should, because of its moral unclarity, be the choice of the woman *becomes* abortion is something that should be widely accessible / is preferable to its suppression) to gun control (citizens should have the freedom to own guns / take responsibility for their safety *becomes* gun ownership provides safety / risk to the individual / society) to the nuclear family (any group should be able to raise children *becomes* the relative efficacy of different child-rearing units). In each of these cases, any belief in a permissivity of the former type is refuted by the discourse itself; the very need for a discussion on the consequences of abortion makes it clear that it is no longer an issue of permissivity. Rather, permissivity itself must be justified, even though it is (under the banner of Freedom), one of the fundamental tenets of Western society. This circular logic, resembling the many absurd attempts of creationists to force paleontological findings into alignment with their beliefs, inevitably results in a violence towards facts. (Unsurprisingly, this tendency finds its dual in those err on the other side, namely the side of facts, a topic outside of the scope of this analysis.)

This "permissivity of *should*" has serious ramifications for the super-ego of the subject in question; namely, the subject is not able

to internalize the ever-changing discourse of permissivity and thereby form a conscience, but must revert to the juvenile state. This juvenile state is, of course, just the morality of social anxiety.

To see how a static, or slow-moving, social punitivity enables the development of the conscience, one must only consider the phenomenon of "Catholic guilt". It is no coincidence that the religion associated so strongly with guilt is the same one with a history of selling indulgences: the purchase of indulgences requires the internalization of doctrine (which is another example of parallaxic tension). Perhaps this is why so-called "callout culture" forgoes appealing to those who have developed a conscience and instead opts solely to mobilize the morality of social anxiety; the tyranny of the other may very well be preferable to the tyranny of the super-ego. [5]

Of course, this account is deeply flawed; the dialectics of permissivity at no point "reverses" the development of the super-ego. This is rather a further development of the super-ego.

If much of the motivation for this text is to make more rigorous rhetoric that shifts between the individual and the social, then we must confront the same issue here with respect to the potential parallels between the development of the two entities. Does the development of society mirror in some way the mental, spiritual, or physiological development of the individual? (Of course, the individual also develops socially, so a naive account would yield us with a paradox similar to the "mystery within mystery" that opens the *Tao te Ching* [13].)

If we speculate that social development is in some way homologous to the development of the mind, then, as a prerequisite for understanding the homology, we must first understand the development of the mind, which is, firstly, the most inconvenient body, and, secondly, not impossible to prosthetize.¹

¹A related phenomenon is the addition of the self to the list of acceptable loci for art, e.g. the fascination with lifestyles. It is easy to criticize the American's inter-

The prosthesis of the mind, i.e. the tool-nature of mind, introduces another paradox; if it is a tool (in a culture with a fetishistic worship of the subject), then what is it in service of? That is to say, that the worship of the subject arises in conjunction with the sacrifice of the subject, but for what? This is perhaps best exemplified by the popularity of Buddhism in the West, which is simultaneously a de-subjectivization and an all-subjectivization (monadic) and de-subjectivization (self-erasure), rejection of Western ideology (material wealth) and acceptance of Western ideology². The defining factor, of course, in the Western fascination with Eastern philosophy, is that the subject is not de-elevated; Western *wu-wei* is not about alignment with the *tao*.

This sacrifice of the self to itself is reminiscent of the “hygeine theory” proposed by a character in David Foster Wallace’s *The Broom of the System*, which revolves around the boundary of the self. While the term “hygeine theory” in this context brings to mind the neurotic, there is also the opposite:

I could buy this restaraunt and have you terminated. I could and perhaps will buy this entire block, including that symbolically tiny Weight Watchers establishment across the street...*Garcon*, what you have before you is a dangerous thing, I warn you. Human beings act in their own interest. Huge, crazed swine do not...Run, run away, fetch me my platter of fat, my nine cattle, or I’ll envelop you in a chin and fling you at the wall!.[15]

est in a successful person’s lifestyle as originating from a belief that lifestyle determines success, but perhaps it is precisely the opposite: every 21st century artist is an artwork first. For instance, Instagram fame may not be a result of celebrity, but rather a prerequisite. The much-maligned use of fedoras, Carhartt jackets, flannels, ornate facial hair, etc. as fashion accessories among a certain demographic cannot be confused with “costuming,” but is rather more akin to the popularity of the “minimalist lifestyle.”

²<https://hbr.org/2015/12/how-meditation-benefits-ceos>

Somehow, this character's refusal to act in his own interest *is* in his own interest. What is unique, and accurate, in this model of the expansion of the self is that it is not reproductive; the reproduction of the self would be terrifying (as demonstrated in Jordan Peele's film *Us*). However, what is lacking in hygeine theory is the appeal found in seeing oneself reflected in the other (with the condition that one's self is seen only in part, rather than in whole). If the unit of life's reproductive processes is truly, the gene, then what we have here, namely the unit of the mind's reproductive processes, is something less tangible, viz. some *pattern*. These patterns are, by definition, "intersubjective."

What we have here is the cyborg self; the singularity at the breakdown between the tool and the tool-maker, and the decomposition of the self from a unique, irreducible, unpropagatable object, to a loose bundle (a sheaf, if you will) of viral forms; simultaneously, techno-permanence, in adding "always will be" to identity's "always has been," completes the temporal transcendence of the self. This is what makes the cyborg inhuman, for it cannot take solace in repetition, *toujours*, alldaze, adrift in space and fixed in time.

*Ne manque pas de dire à ton amant, Chimène, comme le lac
est beau car il faut qu'il t'y mene.*

Bibliography

- [1] Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan press, 1994.
- [2] Jacques Derrida. *On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness*. Routledge, 2003.
- [3] Clara Dollar. "My So-Called (Instagram) Life". In: *The New York Times* (May 2017). URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/style/modern-love-my-so-called-instagram-life.html>.
- [4] Michel Foucault. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Vintage, 2012.
- [5] Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and its discontents*. WW Norton & Company, 1989.
- [6] James Joyce. *Finnegans wake*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- [7] James Joyce. *Ulysses*. Editora Companhia das Letras, 2012.
- [8] Franz Kafka. *A hunger artist*. Feedbooks, 1922.
- [9] Franz Kafka and Max Brod. *Briefe, 1902-1924*. (Hrsg. Von Max Brod. 1966.
- [10] Karl Ove Knausgaard. *My Struggle: Book 3: Boyhood*. 2014.
- [11] Karl Ove Knausgaard. *My Struggle: Book Two*. Archipelago Books, 2013.

- [12] Jacques Lacan and Bruce Fink. *Ecrits: The first complete edition in English*. WW Norton & Company, 2006.
- [13] Laozi et al. *Tao te ching*. Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005.
- [14] Claude Lévi-Strauss. *STRUCTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY*. BASIC BOOKS, 1963.
- [15] David Foster Wallace. *The broom of the system*. Penguin, 2010.
- [16] Slavoj Žižek. *Is It Still Possible to Be a Hegelian Today*. De Gruyter, 2012.
- [17] Slavoj Žižek. *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso, 1989.
- [18] Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupancic, et al. *The puppet and the dwarf: The perverse core of Christianity*. MIT Press, 2003.
- [19] Alenka Zupančič. *What is sex?* MIT Press, 2017.