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SPLIJTSTOF

Inhoudsopgave

Editorial: Splijtstof on 'Fantasy'	7
<i>Sophie Ingle</i>	
An Infinite Present Without Consequences	9
<i>Jonathan Zackor</i>	
The Realness: What the Fantasy of Drag Can Teach Us About Reality	19
<i>Marleen van Haalen</i>	
Disabled Dreams of Accessible Academia: Fantasy, or Feasible?	29
<i>Charlie Chowdhry</i>	
Frutiger Aero: A Fantasy of a Better Future	39
<i>Saar Boter</i>	
CRISPR and The Fantasy of Human Immortality	53
<i>Susana Reis</i>	
Self-Annihilation in David Fincher's <i>Fight Club</i>	67
<i>Jacque Marliin</i>	
De bezwering van het kapitalisme en de toverspreuk van de ideologie	79
<i>Mark den Dekker</i>	



Editorial: Spltjstof on 'Fantasy'

Dear reader,

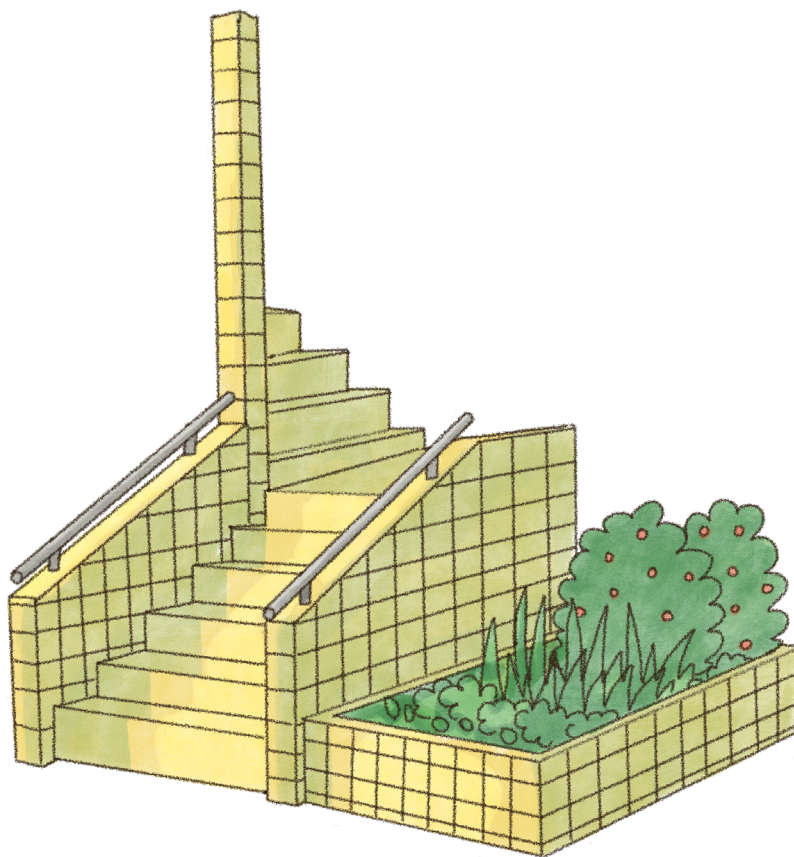
On November 28, 2024, the Spltjstof team had the privilege of organising, coordinating, and hosting our Student Conference. Although it was our first time working with this format, the event was a great success! It began as a fun idea – a fantasy, if you will – in a team meeting, which evolved into a true passion project when Charlie and I decided to put our ideas into action. We soon realised that we had been fantasising about the kinds of Spltjstof initiatives we would like to see, and decided that 'Fantasy' makes for a wonderful philosophy conference theme.

The enthusiasm in every abstract, paper, presentation, panel, and discussion is a testament to the brilliant people around us. We will always be grateful for the fantastic support (pun intended) shown to us by members of the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies before, during, and after the event. In particular, we would like to take this moment to express our heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Tim Miechels and Dr. Rae Aumiller. It is their kindness and generosity that kept us going – inquiring, brainstorming, reviewing, scheduling, and all the rest.

While there is much to be said for each of our fantastic conference participants and their presentations, the papers in this special edition of Spltjstof will speak for themselves. On that note, I am proud to have seen the 'Fantasy' brought to life in November, and I am equally excited to invite you to feel it in the pages that follow.

Sophie Ingle

Editor-in-Chief



An Infinite Present Without Consequences

The Absurd Promise of Liminal Space

Jonathan Zackor

Abstract: Liminality and liminal states are generally understood as transitional in nature, something between a start and a destination. In my paper, I will investigate liminality through the internet aesthetic #liminalspace. Typical of the aesthetic are digitally rendered images picturing transitional spaces such as hotel hallways, shopping malls, staircases, swimming pools, with one significant element usually native to these spaces missing: human presence. Liminal space relates to the topic of fantasy in two ways: firstly, creative fantasy is necessary for the creation of liminal space images. Secondly, one can fantasize about being and acting in liminal spaces.

In my paper, I first set out to trace an understanding of liminal spaces with their affective potentiality. At their core, and particularly within the internet aesthetic of #liminalspace, liminal spaces are in constant conflict. Online audiences have reported them to inspire a feeling of eerie familiarity, in which images of liminal space images can evoke dread but also create feelings of comfort and being at peace. To reflect upon the complex nature of liminal spaces, I will discuss Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia and Sigmund Freud's understanding of the Uncanny/das (Un)Heimliche. This is followed by a more creative exercise in imagining myself to be in a liminal space, allowing me to think through what liminal spaces can do for us. I will argue, following an existential approach, that liminal space can become a manifestation of the Absurd (à la Albert Camus), creating a fantasy of an infinite present that has no consequences. We are haunted by the unattainable liberation that liminal space promises us. We can only ever enter it in our dreams and imagination.

Keywords: liminal space, internet aesthetics, infinite present, Freud, Foucault, Camus

I would like to start by asking you to imagine the following. You may feel inspired by the image on the following page:



Imagine that you are in a space that you usually just pass through to get from a Point A to a Point B. Maybe you are imagining yourself at the airport, maybe on the way to your lecture room on the staircase of the Erasmus building, maybe on your walk between the train or bus stop and your home.

Now, imagine this space to be completely empty.

There are no other people, no animals; none of the sounds and noises that are at home in this location. No trace of anyone else there with you. The only living presence is you. The usual discomfort that you might have to deal with in your imagined space is also suddenly gone. If you are outside, there is no wind, no cold. You are not experiencing hunger or pain. By all appearances, you feel somewhat content with yourself. You check your phone. You cannot seem to find it at first, but when you do, you see that it has lost its signal and that the battery is almost empty. You start wandering around, but, no matter in what direction you turn, it seems that everyone has decided to leave at the same moment, like they vanished into thin air. It is as if you missed the loudspeaker announcement that it was time to go. You may wonder how you ended up in this situation, and yet you are not concerned. Yes, it was time to leave. To go home, to catch your flight, but – if no one is around anyways, does it really matter? Usually, you are always in a rush. In a rush to finish your assignments, in a rush getting ready so that you are not late for work, in a rush to have dinner because you need to eat something

and you have already been procrastinating for so long and you cannot go to bed hungry. You usually always have this internal drive to get faster, to improve yourself, until you finally feel like you have earned the right to some free time, knowing that you might never feel like you fully deserve it. Now, however, for some reason, it is like your mind has finally gone quiet, settled down. You only wonder about this for a brief second. Then you let it go. Purely out of habit, you check your phone again. Even though it feels like ten minutes have passed since you last checked it, the time has not changed. You do not wonder why, you just accept it. Time stretches out in front of you.

I have noticed something that strikes me as rather peculiar: Whenever I feel like I am stuck working on something – this could be anything from writing an essay or cleaning the bathroom to figuring out how to deal with this one interpersonal interaction – I find moments of clarity in the most inopportune moments: when I am on the bus on the way to an important event, when I am in the shower and washing my hair ... at any moment in which I am unable to write my epiphany down but am forced to sit with it for a while, desperately having to hold onto it before I forget about it again. In these moments, suddenly, everything falls into place. When I least expect it. There seems to be this kind of strange potential in these inopportune moments, these moments that kind of fall out of a designated structure. In my talk/paper, I would like to take you with me on an investigation of the potentiality that I consider to be embodied in the internet aesthetic #liminalspace. Regarding the topic of this conference edition, I have wanted to conjure up a fantasy that takes this aesthetic as a referential point, wanting to make sense of, or creating room for, the consideration of a somewhat absurd promise: a fantasy of an infinite present where we are free of the consequences of our own actions. This is a fantasy that is beyond limits, but I am curious as to how this fantasy may enable us to pursue an existential observation so as to find meaning in our lives.

As a starting point into my investigation, I would first like to situate liminality as a concept and to illustrate how it relates to the internet aesthetic of #liminalspace. My perception of liminal space as simultaneously absurd and full of promises is tied to a consideration of liminal space as affective. That is, capable of evoking specific intensities within people. In my case, the intensity that liminal space creates is surfacing as the aforementioned epiphanies I get in inopportune moments. In an attempt to come to terms with this general affective-ness of liminal space, I will refer to Michel Foucault's heterotopia and Sigmund Freud's aesthetic investigation of the Uncanny.

Liminality and liminal states are generally understood to be transitional in nature. At its most abstract, liminality refers to an in-between state between two previously established things, describing, in a way, a void space that is not quite graspable. We can also consider liminality to be located between a start and a destination, between one action and another: something in progress, but which evades exact definition and confinement to a specific locality. I consider it as leaving room to be invested by meaning, depending on the situation. Thus, at its most concrete, liminality appears to be inherently fluid.

It seems that, in attempting to adopt this definition to try to understand the phenomenon of the internet aesthetic #liminalspace, I am in for a bit of a challenge. If liminality is fluid and contextual, how can an internet aesthetic emerge from this? The aesthetic appears to reference liminality's transitional nature by a concrete use of images that show traditional transitional spaces such as hotel hallways, shopping malls, and staircases, but also swimming pools, carnivals, and other entertainment spaces. Yet one principal element to these spaces is altered, which instantly makes itself known to be missing: human presence. As such, images participating in the liminal space aesthetic are often digitally created, or rendered. The mainstream origins of the aesthetic are to be found in 2019. On 4chan, an online image-based forum, a digitally rendered picture of what looks like an empty, carpeted office space with fluorescent overhead lights was first described as depicting the Backrooms, a kind of alternate reality. Both the Backrooms and liminal spaces gained quick popularity on mainstream media content platforms such as Reddit, YouTube, Pinterest and TikTok, leading to a proliferation of images and later videos under the hashtags of liminal space(s) and/or the Backrooms. The main commonality inherent to these aesthetics appears to lie within their affective potential to evoke a feeling of discomfort. A disconcerting vibe, a feeling that something is not quite right. This is linked to the complete absence of humans in those transitional spaces that are usually bustling, full of life, or that, at the very least, bear traces of a frequent passing-through. We, the humans who necessitated the creation of these spaces, are absent. These spaces then transform from something commonplace into something that disturbs us. And yet, the aesthetic has gained a following.

In the preface of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Michel Foucault talks about states of disorder: they make it “impossible to find a space of residence for [things], to define a *common locus* beneath them all” (2002, xix). States of disorder are in disorder because they lack common reference points: they fall outside our established order and structure through which we make sense of the world around us. Within this discus-

sion, he names two categories: utopias, which “afford consolation” (xix), and heterotopias. Heterotopias are spaces of otherness that disrupt. That disturb. According to Foucault, they “dessicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences” (xix). They elude description, shatter structure, and escape fixed meanings. What Foucault refers to – this dimension of disruption – can also be found to apply for liminal spaces, as they fall outside of known experience, as they are *not quite* at home in our world.

Responses from online audiences have, surprisingly, highlighted some common affective ground: viewers experience a strange familiarity with the spaces that are often digitally created, leading them to share sentiments such as: “I feel like I’ve been here before,” “I have dreamt about this place,” “this looks like somewhere I went when I was a child.” This appears to be somewhat at odds with Foucault’s heterotopia. Even though – or perhaps precisely because – they betray their usual reason for existing, if we think of liminal spaces as transitional spaces which are missing the context inherent to them, liminal spaces can have a certain attractiveness to them, perhaps as spaces in which the unconscious feels at home. As spaces in which one can recognize oneself as having been there before, even just in a dream, liminal spaces hold a lot of power. At the same time, feeling like one has once been in a particular place that is featured in a liminal space image, but having no concrete memory of it, just a vague sense of familiarity, might repel people.

Liminal spaces can have a certain attractiveness to them, perhaps as spaces in which the unconscious feels at home.

I associate this tension with what has been referred to as the Uncanny. One account of the Uncanny itself comes, most famously, from Sigmund Freud (2003). He initially believes it to belong to the “realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (123). He starts an aesthetic investigation (123) of the term, referring to its etymology in the German language where it has an inherent opposing meaning. The Uncanny, in German, translates as *das Unheimliche*. In one part of the word, *heimlich*, there are “various shades of meaning [...] recorded” (132), one being something associated with homely comfort, another with something that remains hidden, secret. With the second meaning, Freud sees *heimlich* as merging with its precise antonym: *unheimlich*. It appears that “the Uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, the ‘unhomely’) is in some way a species of the familiar” (134). Another well-known associ-

ation of the Uncanny comes from the Japanese robotics professor Masahiro Mori who coined the term of the ‘Uncanny Valley.’ It describes a “descent into eeriness” (Mori 2012) at a moment of realization when humans come across an entity that is initially thought to be human, but where, upon closer inspection, it turns out to be *not quite* human. The response thus triggered is described as “abruptly shift[ing] from empathy to revulsion” (2012). Depending on the audience’s desire to invest liminal space with meaning, Freud’s Uncanny gives a name to the familiarity one may experience upon viewing a liminal space image, but simultaneously it inspires a descent into eeriness upon the realization that there is something inherently off about the space.

To note the uncanny rearing its head when one considers liminal space, while also being met with a certain desirability present in these spaces, leads us back to the beginning of this investigation. Liminal spaces cannot be defined to be anything other than an inbetween state, and yet they hold our attention. In the remaining paragraphs, I want to follow this line of inquiry.

If we have imagined ourselves to be in a space where all other human presence is absent, the usual noises and other sensory input that usually help us to orient ourselves in this space are also absent. If all other points of orientation in a space are removed, it makes sense to also presume a sense of time to be absent in the liminal space. In a space where no one is present, not even time, all responsibility is removed. All accountability, all pressure to behave in a certain way. All pressure to work, be productive; all pressure to never stand still. With no one watching or being influenced by the way you are behaving, there is inherent freedom to do what you would like to do and to express yourself. In actuality, we are unable to know this alternate reality: thus, the possibility of this alternate reality makes itself known to us as absurd. With regards to the possibility of complete self-expression that being in the liminal space affords to us, there is an obvious caveat: with no other human presence, there is no one to convince, no one to share a self-expression with.

Here I would like to share a personal anecdote: In the process of receiving my diagnosis of gender dysphoria, I was asked by the attending clinician whether I would still feel like I had an incongruence with the gender I was assigned at birth if I suddenly was the only person in the world. I have shared this anecdote with people previously, and was surprised to hear how weird they thought this question was, as imagining a scenario in which only I can perceive myself and I am outside our reality is unrealistic. As such, the question is redundant and inappropriate. In the moment where this question was asked to me, however, I did not even pause: of course I still wanted to be myself even with no one watching. I will never be afforded that privilege, but

I cannot imagine not wanting to be authentic to myself. In a way, I feel like I am able to be even more authentic to myself when I am alone, because I do not need to ask myself whether I am behaving weirdly or whether I might put people off by being myself.

Imagining ourselves in a liminal space offers us this fantasy. It also allows us to reminisce, to travel in time. Liminal spaces allow us to infuse them with meaning. Perhaps they allow us to think back to times in which we thought we had inherent freedom. With some users reporting that they feel that they have been in a specific space as children which they have since found to be depicted in a digitally created #liminalspace image, liminal space does indeed come to offer this potential: that of creating our own perfect little fantasy, but to have it take shape in a 'real' location. The images of transitional spaces such as hotel hallways are easily recognizable in some form or other to almost every person, giving us the opportunity to have them act as a backdrop for our own recollections and vague memories. As such, spaces of entertainment may also allow us to give us a frame into which to teleport happy childhood memories, creating an illusion for us that these have happened in this space. This allows us to insert ourselves into this space. The attractiveness of the liminal space aesthetic is then tied to an ability to imagine this space via the visual frames that make up the aesthetic. Knowing that we are just a little bit outside a reality in which we are alone but content. Where the heavy burdens of adulthood are out of reach. Where there is no danger, no distress, no harm. In the liminal space we have a desire for an endless wanting. We strive for a perfect life that is made up of longing for and, at the same time, knowing absolute freedom. This desire is only possible because we are being denied this in everyday life. Its opposite is forced onto us. Without knowing the reality of not having personal freedom, absolute personal freedom is not possible. But because we cannot escape our reality, absolute personal freedom is out of reach for us.

Because we can only ever enter this fantasy in our dreams and imagination, we are haunted by the unattainable liberation that liminal space promises us.

It feels like a liberation to consider, even in fantasy, a reality in which we feel no judgment, no policing over how to behave, where we are free of the restrictions and constraints that we have to endure in society, free of privilege but also free of discrimination. But because we can only ever enter this fantasy in our dreams and imagination, we are haunted by the unattainable liberation that liminal space promises us. In short, the fantasy of the liminal

space is created and mediated by our having to know its opposite in everyday life. Keeping in mind Foucault's heterotopia as a space that disrupts, that takes us in a dimension of otherness, liminal spaces appear as heterotopias par excellence – where they can be disturbing or disconcerting because they exist outside reality. (*But not quite*).

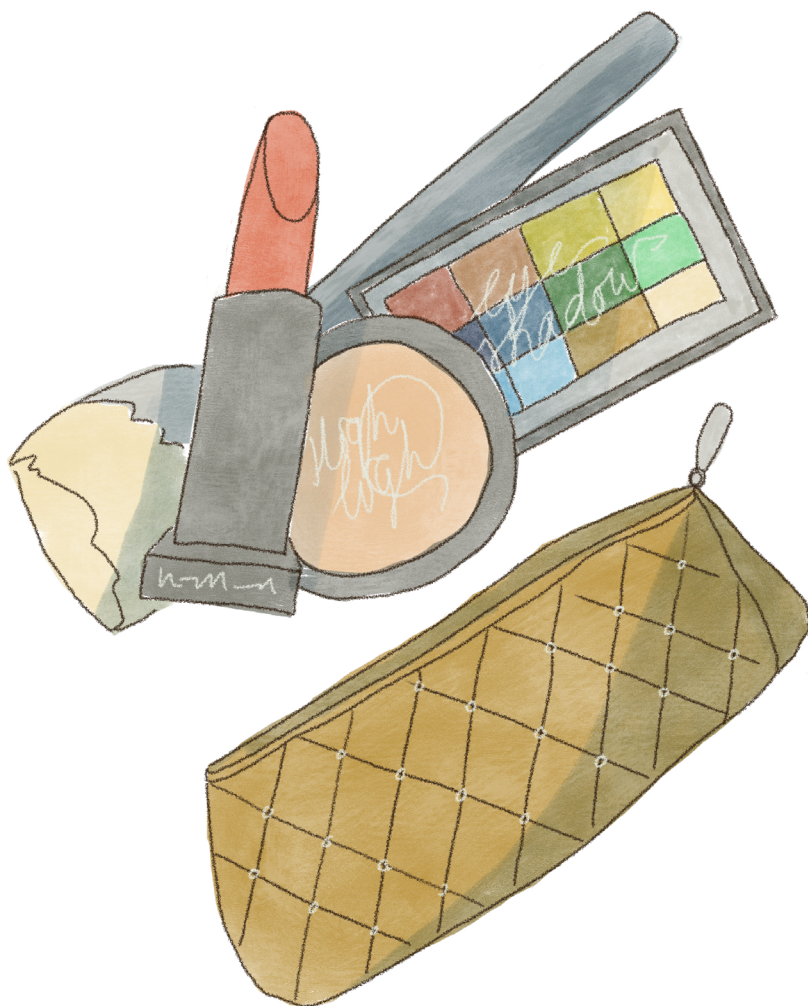
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SPLIJTSTOF



The Realness

What the Fantasy of Drag Can Teach Us About Reality

Marleen van Haalen

Abstract: Drag is an art form which brings human imagination to life. It is not just a form of entertainment, but also a form of societal critique and political activism. Drag uses fantasy, abundance and extravagance to tell us something about the truth of gender, emotions, love and human existence. However, drag does not only teach us something about the human subject. In this paper, I aim to show that drag reveals something more profound, not just about human reality, but about the reality of all existing things. While humans manipulate certain objects to bring fantasy to life, these objects certainly seem to manipulate humans as well, meaning humans are not the only entities that bring the art of drag to life. In line with Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), I argue that objects such as high heels, make-up, wigs, breast plates, padding, tights, fake beards and glitter show that an anthropocentric subject-object dualism is untenable. In order to do so, I will briefly explain metaphysical arguments against anthropocentrism developed by Graham Harman and Timothy Morton, both adherents of OOO, and by analysing the art of drag I will demonstrate how humans are not the only beings that manipulate – or rather ‘morph’, as Morton calls it – other beings. Moreover, I will argue that ‘feeling the fantasy’ – the phenomenon of a person losing themselves in their drag persona and performance – is only possible due to some kind of autonomous agency of nonhuman entities that is incompatible with anthropocentrism.

Introduction

There has been a lot of critique, hate comments and protest against Ma'MaQueen (Venus Bijleveld, a famous Dutch drag queen) reading children's books to children in the Netherlands over the past year. For several reasons – which are most likely all based on misconceptions about drag, and are arguably all homo-, queer- and transphobic – people are opposed to drag performers and artists. Clearly, those people do not know what drag is and does, and they cannot seem to figure it out even though drag performers are often quite open about who they are and what they do.

Although it is impossible to explain *all* that drag is and does, in short, it can be best explained as an art form. It consists of many different forms of self-expression through extravagance and exaggeration of, e.g., make-up, body shapes, hair, clothes and accessories. It can be conceptual or more pageant-like, and it can be done by anyone for many purposes, such as –

but not limited to – comedy performance, social and political commentary, fashion statements and gender expression. Drag is often seen as realisation of a fantasy world, bringing human imagination to life. Through this actualised fantasy, humans are able to question and push the boundaries of gender identity and politics, and express something about what it means to be human. While this may be the case, my aim is to show that drag not only tells us something about humans, but about nonhumans as well.

In line with Graham Harman's and Timothy Morton's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), I argue that objects such as high heels, make-up, wigs, breast plates, padding, tights, fake beards and glitter show us that the anthropocentric subject-object dualism in which activity and freedom are ascribed only to the (human) subject, while objects are seen as completely passive, inert and deterministic, is untenable. In order to do so, I will briefly explain Harman's arguments against what Morton calls 'anthropocentrism', and by analysing the art of drag, I will demonstrate how humans are not the only beings that manipulate – or rather, 'morph', as Morton calls it – other beings. Moreover, I will argue that 'feeling the fantasy' – the phenomenon of a person losing themselves in their drag persona and performance – is only possible due to some kind of autonomy of nonhuman entities. In other words, because nonhuman entities have some kind of autonomy, the effects they have need to be ascribed to themselves, rather than to our own thought or imagination.

Because nonhuman entities have some kind of autonomy, the effects they have need to be ascribed to themselves, rather than to our own thought or imagination.

The Anthropocentric Fantasy

Why can the effects drag objects have not just be ascribed to human imagination? After all, humans design, manipulate and create these objects. For example, they make cotton into fabric, they make fabric into a dress, and they modify and accessorize the dress to make it into an outfit. This may well be the case, but thinking that humans as active, free subjects have total and complete control over objects without them exercising any control over humans or over each other is an anthropocentric fantasy. Following French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, Morton claims that since Immanuel Kant, Western philosophy has been dominated by the idea that it is impossible to think 'world' without humans, nor humans without 'world', which means it would be impossible to say anything about the 'thing-in-itself'. This

idea is what Meillassoux has called ‘correlationism’. Correlationism poses a problem: if it is impossible to say anything about the thing-in-itself, then anything outside of thinking cannot be thought. In its most extreme form, correlationism claims that it cannot even be said that things exist outside of thought, since posing something outside of thought is already a form of thinking about it, and thus it is within thought (Meillassoux 2008, 5).

Philosophers have tried to solve this problem by bridging the human-world gap, claiming that the (human) subject is able to transcend its own finitude towards a sphere of pure freedom, accessible only to humans. Morton argues that it is this privileged transcendental sphere of pure freedom that constitutes the problem, placing humans at the centre of being, despite Kant’s specific aim to de-centre humans when proposing this transcendental sphere (Morton 2013, 17–18). According to Morton, humans cannot break through the finitude in order to reach the things-in-themselves. How can we de-centre humans from being, then? By acknowledging that not only are humans finite, but all other entities are as well. In other words, the problem of correlationism is not that humans cannot access the thing-in-itself because of an ontological gap. Rather, the problem is that the gap is only ascribed to humans. In line with Harman’s OOO, Morton argues that all entities – or objects, as they call them – share the same ontological structure. *All* objects, which include humans, are *withdrawn* and therefore never fully knowable; the gap exists for *every* entity, not just for humans. Why? Because objects can neither be reduced ‘upwards’ to their effects on or relations with other entities, nor can they be reduced ‘downwards’ to their components.

Harman calls the reduction of objects to their components *undermining* (2010, 10). When objects are undermined, their component parts are seen as more essential or fundamental than these objects themselves, e.g., the Radboud University is just a bunch of buildings, the Erasmus Building is just a bunch of (very thin) walls, the walls are just a bunch of bricks, the bricks are just molecules and these molecules are really just atoms, etc. This example is, of course, oversimplified, but the point is that if one follows through on the logic of undermining, one would have to keep on reducing things to their parts until one ends up with *one* substance. Thus, one would end up with monism, since stopping at any level other than the most ‘basic’ or ‘fundamental’ level would be arbitrary. The problem with monism and with undermining is that it cannot explain the occurrence of emergent properties, i.e., if everything can be reduced to one fundamental substance such as atoms – which of course would be an outdated view, but that is not my point here – then there is no reason why and how this underlying fundamental unity of atoms would divide into specific individual things, each with their own

effects and emergent properties (Harman 2011, 61). Thus, while component parts may *form* an object, this object cannot be *reduced* to its parts; it cannot be undermined.

Another way of reducing objects is to equate them to their effects or relations, which Harman calls *overmining*. According to this view, objects are only real insofar as they manifest to other entities. A major problem with overmining is that it cannot account for change. If things are their relational effects, they are completely actualised in any given moment; they are exhausted by their current givenness. But if this is the case, there would be no principle to explain change; there would be no reason why anything would ever alter at all (Harman 2010, 12). For example, if there were no difference between the I who is writing this article and the I who is what they are, this means I would never stop writing this article. Thankfully, this is not the case.

Another problem is that if things are their relations, there is “no way to link different relations together to make them relations to the *same* thing” (Harman 2010, 12–13). There would only be a bunch of loose relations, e.g., if I were nothing but my relations, and I have relations with you, my laptop, my cat, and the breakfast I haven’t eaten yet, there would be nothing to tie all those relations to *me* to make them relations of *me*, and not of any other entity. Needless to say, this logic does not only apply to me, but to every entity. Thus, objects have to be something other than just their relational effects. They can neither be undermined nor overmined. Instead, they have to lie somewhere between their relational effects and their constitutive parts. They are inaccessible and inexhaustible to *any* object. The fact that humans cannot reach the thing-in-itself is then not merely due to a human finitude, but due to the finitude of *every* real object. This means that humans do not ontologically differ from other objects.

Everything is in the -Morphing Business

Consequently, the anthropocentric idea that humans are active and free subjects who can completely dominate passive and deterministic objects cannot be maintained. As Morton writes:

[W]e [must] release the anthropocentric copyright control on the gap and allow everything in the universe to have it, which means dropping the idea that (human) thought is the top access mode and holding that brushing against, licking or irradiating are also access modes as valid (or invalid) as thinking. (Morton 2017, 11)

The effects nonhumans have cannot be reduced to something like natural instincts, as this would mean that nonhuman acting or behaving would be reduced to biological or physical processes. Natural laws, evolutionary processes, and something like 'nature' would then be the cause of anything that happens regarding nonhuman objects, completely determining what an object is and does since it is itself completely passive. But humans sometimes act in a passive way too, adhering to instincts or unconsciousness, and even then, the effect would be ascribed to humans themselves.

Consider this: you are on your way home from your studies. On the way home, you start thinking about the text you have to prepare for tomorrow's class. All of a sudden, you find yourself standing in your living room. You realise that you got yourself home without acting consciously. Your behaviour may have been influenced by traffic lights, curbs, cyclists, landmarks and the keys in your pocket, even if you were not actively thinking about it. When humans act like this, i.e., on 'autopilot', out of habit, passively, what they do is still ascribed to themselves, whether acting consciously, intentionally, actively, or not. The point here is not to claim that all objects act as actively as humans do. Rather, the point is to diminish the rigid boundary between active and passive as a criterion for ascribing causality to an entity. Whether or not nonhuman objects are active or passive, the effect they have should still be ascribed to themselves, and not to an active entity that determines them completely.

Let us take a look at an example of an object that might be seen as the pinnacle of mere passivity: a rock. A rock appears to humans as an unchanging, solid entity that does not do anything itself. When it moves, it is said to be due to an earthquake, a change in temperature, or erosion, but never due to itself. However, rocks do in fact do things. They have an effect that cannot be reduced to other objects, e.g., they exert pressure, they have a scent, they take up heat from the sun and then warm up the air around them. Ascribing the effect of objects, like rocks, to themselves may seem anthropomorphic, because it is. But this is not a problem for OOO. Remember, the problem was *anthropocentrism*, not *anthropomorphism*. Morton argues that while we should get rid of the former, we can never get rid of the latter (2017, 129). Humans cannot help being anthropomorphic, since they cannot break through the finitude towards a transcendental sphere of pure freedom.

The difference between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism is that the former is not characterised by the idea that humans are special beings amongst 'purely natural' beings. As Morton writes, when eating grapes "the grapes are grape-morphizing my fingers and my mouth, causing me to handle them just so. Anyone who has taken drugs will tell you that there is a more or less "right" way to handle them – one is drug-morphized" and so

anthropomorphism does not face the same problems as anthropocentrism because “[e]verything is in the -morphing business” (2017, 129). Humans are not the only beings to whom effects can be ascribed. Other beings also influence each other, including human beings.

The Realness of the Fantasy of Drag

Drag seems to be especially well suited for analysing how objects -morph humans as much as humans -morph them. Again, I cannot possibly cover all that drag does, but I can at least give some examples of what drag objects do. How humans -morph these objects seems quite clear: humans make breast plates, heels, clothes, accessories, wigs, fake beards and make-up. They put on these objects, make them into an outfit, creating a drag persona. Simultaneously, these objects alter the person who puts them on. Heels make them walk differently, a breast plate alters their posture, a dress or suit makes them sit down differently, and a wig and make-up boost their confidence. This influences their social behaviour, and all of these objects together can contribute to adopting a different personality. A shy person can become really confident, a kind person can become a bit sassy, and a prudish person can become more liberal.

Objects used for drag can make the person in drag ‘feel the fantasy’, i.e., losing oneself in the drag persona. This is often very apparent when people are put in drag for the first time – as can be seen in certain episodes of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* in which the drag artists transform a fan, family member, friend, or crew-member into their ‘drag daughter’ (or ‘drag child’), or in the Dutch tv-series *Make Up Your Mind*, in which famous Dutch people enter a drag contest as a rookie drag performer. But, of course, a person might also fail to ‘feel the fantasy’, e.g., a confident person can become insecure. Drag is not only empowering, it can also make people vulnerable and might push them out of their comfort zone in a way that makes them insecure. My point is that these drag-objects limit and/or enable a person to do all kinds of things, and since objects are not exhausted by humans, the effect they have is always surprising and can never be fully controlled.

A drag performer is a different object from the human object out of drag, one with emergent properties. As RuPaul once said: “The power of drag is like the Superman suit to Clark Kent. [...] It allows you to expand your idea of who you are, of what you are” (Charles 2024). The drag persona can alter ideas of the person in drag about their own identity. Meanwhile, it may also alter how people who encounter a drag performer think about themselves and other people. These ideas may be related, but are not restricted, to gender. Furthermore, a drag performer at a party may hype people up in a particular kind of way. A drag performer at a protest may draw certain

attention to that protest. Being near a drag performer can even give people confidence to express themselves in a way that they usually would not. Drag can not only make the person in drag ‘feel the fantasy’, but also the people who encounter them.

Drag-objects limit and/or enable a person to do all kinds of things, and since objects are not exhausted by humans, the effect they have is always surprising and can never be fully controlled.

However, a drag performer could also have other effects. Because of their extravagant and exaggerated character, they can also draw out negative responses, as I already mentioned before in the case of Ma’MaQueen. Do not get me wrong, these negative thoughts and feelings are likely already present in the minds of people who express them. Nonetheless, the presence of a drag performer can have the effect of people expressing those thoughts and feelings explicitly in various, often harmful ways. While I think these negative responses derive from homophobic, transphobic and queerphobic ideas and reasoning – which I do not encourage nor agree with at all – it might be a ‘good’ thing that drag draws them out, helping make these hidden, harmful ideas explicit, since it is difficult to oppose that which is hidden. And by continuing to do drag, drag performers are refuting these harmful ideas as a way of protest and a way of putting one’s foot down, showing that it is important to be able to express oneself in a way that one wishes and that it is okay to be different from what is seen as common or ‘normal’, without being harmful to other individuals.

In short, drag can do things that cannot be done by people out of drag, nor by drag objects minus humans, or at least not in the same way or to the same degree. Drag objects have many different effects on many different objects, e.g., people, protests, parties, a reading event for children and a political debate. These effects cannot just be reduced to human acting and human imagination. The effects of drag objects can be novel and surprising due to the withdrawnness of objects. It seems that such is the power of drag.

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SPLIJTSTOF



Disabled Dreams of Accessible Academia: Fantasy, or Feasible?

Charlie Chowdhry

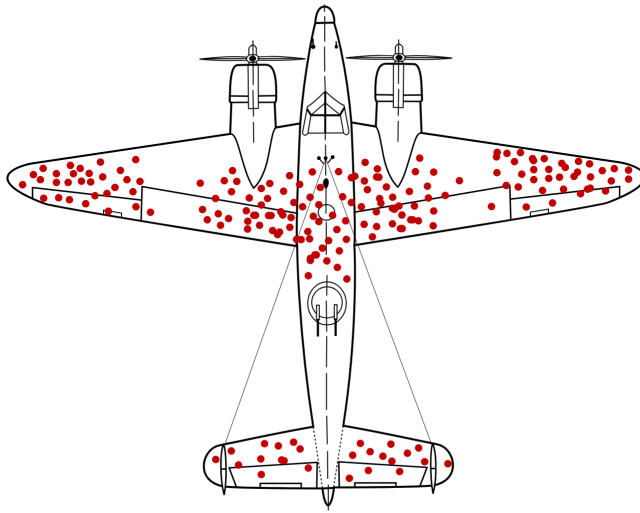
Abstract: This paper begins by describing an imaginary scenario: a university where everybody has as much time to finish their work as they need – an extra hour to finish an exam, and up to an extra fortnight to finish coursework. To most students this is simply fantasy, but, in fact, this is the author's own experience of academia; as a disabled student, he is entitled to extra time and flexible deadlines. Without these accommodations, he would not be able to study at university.

Following the invitation to fantasise about an accessible academic world, this paper conducts a brief investigation into the notions of ability/disability, meritocracy, privilege, artificial adversity, competition/fairness, and philosophy itself through the lens of critical disability studies. It will become apparent that, as it stands, ability is the currency of academia. This paper argues that academia is only 'accessible' in the sense that it gives dispensation to individuals who pass a particular ability threshold. It is not 'accessible' in the sense that it is able or willing to adapt its structure to avoid excluding people on the basis of their abilities.

Due to this access barrier, disabled people who are excluded do not have a platform within academia to advocate for their inclusion. Survivorship bias and access exceptionalism obscure the extent to which academia works through mechanisms of exclusion. Since disability is a mutable category, our right to be academics is contingent – unless we work together now to make academia accessible for our future selves.

Keywords: disability in academia, ability, accessibility, accommodation, meritocracy, critical disability studies, access exceptionalism.

I would like to begin this paper by drawing attention to my own positionality. Two aspects of my positionality are relevant. Firstly: I am here. Secondly, I am a disabled student. At a certain moment, I will be speaking about myself, but, at others, I will be speaking about people who have been structurally excluded from the opportunity to speak for themselves. As you read, I would like you to keep in mind this diagram, which is often used as a case study of survivorship bias. Its relevance will become apparent at a later moment.



I invite you to imagine something with me. Imagine you are studying at a university. This may be easier for some of you than others. Now imagine that, if you need more time for an assignment, you can take an extra week, two weeks, maybe an extra month. Imagine that you can take an hour longer in your exam if you feel like you're running out of time. If you are feeling tired or worn out, you don't need to be in class, and your lecturer will be okay with it. Sometimes, if you talk to your lecturer, you can be excused from doing a group project, and you can work by yourself instead.

Once you are finished fantasising about how amazing that would be, I am pleased to let you know that this is within the realm of possibility for you; all you have to do is be disabled. Some of the things I listed there are my own disability accommodations, and some of them are accommodations that my friends receive for their own disabilities. These accommodations are accessibility measures designed to place me, and my fellow disabled students, on a level playing field with nondisabled students.

My accommodations are working by design when I pass, and they are also working by design when I fail. They make it possible for me to continue to access academia even with the challenges presented to me by my disability. Here, I loosely define academia as a network of institutions and experts who share and produce knowledge systematically and hierarchically. Cynically, I think that accommodations from academic institutions are not necessarily designed to make sure that disabled people can work to the best of our abilities, but are rather designed so that, at moments when we do fail, we cannot reasonably claim that we failed because of our disability. In what follows, I will try to explain the origin of my cynicism.

Crip Genealogies is an anthology of written works on disability studies, intersecting with critical pedagogy, feminist critique, queer studies and postcolonial studies. At the very beginning of the anthology, academia is described by one of the authors as “ableist to its core” (Chen et al. 2023, 4). This accusation is harsh, but it makes sense when we take a moment to consider how many of academia’s structures and values are based on ability. Academia necessarily discriminates on the basis of ability – the ability to write, present, think critically, and conduct research are highly valued academic skills. One could even see this as a positive: if we judge academics on the basis of their ability, de-prioritising arbitrary factors such as their class, sex, race, nationality or age, we create a fair meritocratic system that rewards those who have earned it.

Ability is one of those nebulous terms that is taken for granted and evades any kind of meaningful definition. To say that ability is ‘an able-ness to-’ is immediately redundant, since the very word ‘ability’ already calls us to consider able-ness with its prefix. ‘An able-ness to’ designates what can be done, and – whether through our individual faculties (our bodies and our brains, their capabilities and their limitations) or through our individual privileges – what we can and cannot access. I would therefore suggest that ability refers to what is possible for an individual, given their faculties and privileges.

The idea of an academic world that does not discriminate on the basis of ability is at best fantastical, and at worst disconcerting. How could we guarantee the quality of academic work if we do not demand a high standard from academics? How can we ask academics to work to a standard that is impossible for them, given their mental or physical faculties? Surely the ability threshold for access to academia is not arbitrary – the threshold is generated by the standard of work that is currently expected from academics.

Therefore, we might ask if there is any use identifying academia as ‘ableist,’ since this appears to be not only self-evident, but a function of academia by design. As an ‘ism’ alongside other isms such as racism, sexism, and ageism, ableism is a condition, a practice, a principle. Just as it can become systemic or internalised, ableism can be abolished and unlearned. It seems plausible, in theory, that academia could eventually unlearn sexism. At the very least, there are no structural barriers *inherent to academia* that make this an impossibility. But when we look at how academia is structured, we can see that at its very core, academia is an ability economy.

Ability is what brought us here, and it is what keeps us here. Our abilities are what differentiate us from our peers and secure a future in academia. We are pitted against each other in a battle to demonstrate that we are able

to study, research, read, write, and present, not only to an acceptable level, but to a competitive level. We must not only be able individuals, but *more able than others*, if we want to earn our place in the academic world. The main criterion for acceptance to present at this very conference was ability – namely, the ability to write coherently in a short timeframe. The fact that the abstracts submitted for the conference were reviewed blindly meant that we participants waived our right to make our individual circumstances known.

When we look at how academia is structured, we can see that at its very core, academia is an ability economy.

Therefore, the question of accessibility in academia is not a question of administrative or physical logistics, a matter of decolonising the curriculum¹, a matter of unlearning racism, sexism, and ageism, but of whether academia could exist if it did not practise ableism. In other words, if it is impossible to imagine a world where ability is not the foundation of academic hierarchies, the way we decide between academics vying for the same position, inform admissions teams and degree classifications, and influence the decision to accept or reject prospective students into academia, in what world can academia ever stop being ableist? And, furthermore, in what circumstances could we dare to declare anything within academia ‘accessible’?

As part of the research I conducted for this paper, I sent out a short questionnaire to my friends, of whom some are still involved in academia and others are not. I naturally cannot draw any quantitative conclusions from the results of this questionnaire, but I would nevertheless like to draw attention to a recurring theme in the responses. I asked the respondents to imagine that they had been invited for a lecture at a university, and asked them about their access needs. The access needs of almost every respondent were incompatible with the access needs of almost every other respondent. The respondents were asked “Will you be able to concentrate on the lecture without moving around, making noises, talking (to yourself or others), leaving and coming back, or anything else that is not traditionally acceptable during a lecture?”, to which over 70% said ‘no.’ When asked “Will you be able to concentrate on the lecture if *others* move around, make noises, talk (to themselves or others), leave and come back, or anything else that is not traditionally acceptable during a lecture?”, over 70% said ‘no.’

1 It could be argued that this is also an impossible task due to Western academia’s structure and history.

This raises a key issue: what is accessibility, and who is it for? If the organisers of this theoretical lecture made it explicitly clear that the attendees are able to make noise and move around, the lecture would simultaneously become accessible for people who need to make noise and move around, and become inaccessible for people who would need the lecture hall to be quiet and still. Clearly, accessibility is not a matter of loosening certain rules and expectations in order to accommodate everybody. When needs clash, there does not seem to be a way to provide access to everybody. Therefore, a decision needs to be made about whose access can be secured, and whose access needs therefore need to be rejected.

The authors of *Crip Genealogies* write that ‘access-washing’ can be used by institutions to deflect critique and assert white privilege and dominance (2023, 31-5), hindering solidarity between disabled people and other groups. The access needs of certain groups are upheld and, in doing so, the access needs of other groups are positioned as antithetical to the accepted group. The practice of placing a simplified form of ‘access’ above all other forms of justice, thus narrowing down what we understand by the term ‘access,’ is termed access exceptionalism. For example, in making the choice between a wheelchair-accessible venue that is owned by a racist company, and a venue that is owned by people of colour but is *not* wheelchair-accessible, the organisers of an event could deflect criticism for their choice to support a racist business by claiming that they are simply considering the access needs of disabled people. Thus, the event can call itself ‘accessible’ for accommodating wheelchair users, in spite of the fact that it is inaccessible for people of colour.

Furthermore, the authors also highlight that access-washing can allow ableist structures themselves to go unchallenged (35). When certain groups’ demands for access are continually secured, and other groups’ demands for access are continually rejected – or even critiqued as being ableist towards the group whose access is secured – ‘accessibility’ becomes a narrow designation that loses its broader meaning. Talk of an ‘accessible’ campus immediately conjures up an image of wheelchair ramps, large bathroom stalls, and smooth-paved wide paths. It connotes a campus that makes itself more physically available to certain bodies. It does not connote a campus that is readily accessible to protesters, political undesirables, immunocompromised individuals with long covid or a serious allergy, people who cannot afford the tuition fee or a long study fine, or those who are not able to reach the ability threshold put in place by the board of admissions.

So long as academia is responsible for creating knowledge about itself, it will be responsible for creating knowledge about who can be, and should be, an academic. As such, those who are excluded from academia are struc-

turally excluded from creating academic knowledge about themselves, and about the legitimacy of the knowledge they create. This is not to say that grassroots movements are not valid sources of knowledge, but that academic knowledge is placed – or rather, places itself – hierarchically above the forms of knowledge that it devalues. My right to access academia as a disabled person is a result of my positionality, that is, my belonging to groups whose access is continually secured – groups who have historically demonstrated that they have what it takes to be academic.

How often it is argued that ‘affirmative action’ will make academia inaccessible for worthy, nonmarginalised students – that it will replace a perfectly able, nonmarginalised student with a less able student from a marginalised position in society. It is not unthinkable that this line of argumentation will be spurred on by the ongoing budget crisis. Implicit in the argument that ‘affirmative action’ will displace worthy, nonmarginalised students is the belief that ability is the ultimate equaliser, and that nonmarginalised students are somehow more able – and thus more worthy – than marginalised students: hence the indignation at their displacement.

The success of those who had space made for them in academia through ‘affirmative action’ confronts us with the fact that ability is multifaceted, consisting not only in faculties but also in privileges. Granting access to certain marginalised groups who have consistently had their demands for access rejected naturally destabilises an imaginary of academic worthiness that does not consider ability from an intersectional perspective. In other words, an intersectional investigation of what factors into ability forces us not only to consider faculties, but also privileges.

For many of us, our right to access academia has not been historically secured. Much of the ‘evidence’ for our ability (or lack thereof) to adequately participate in academia was racist and sexist rhetoric that had been naturalised. The fact that we lacked the ability to participate in academia was upheld as proof that we lacked the ability to do so. Or, rather, we were not able to access academia, since we lacked the privilege to do so; so it could be argued, owing to a lack of evidence of academic ability, that we lacked the faculties that made us able to be academic. Each of us, by being present here in this academic space, are actively disproving these racist and sexist discourses.

I will now refer back to the diagram of the plane that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The red dots on this plane are areas where planes returning from combat in the Second World War were hit by enemy fire. Looking at this diagram, you can see that certain areas are incredibly vulnerable to being hit, and some areas don’t seem to have been hit at all and are of minimal concern. You could therefore assume that reinforcing these

vulnerable areas would be a great idea – this is certainly the conclusion the military came to. Abraham Wald, the statistician, begged to disagree. He noted that these bullet holes were visible in planes that managed to return home. You can be hit in all the areas in red and still manage to make it back: that’s how the military were able to collect this data in the first place. The lack of evidence for planes being hit in certain spots – the gaps in the evidence – is evidence that planes cannot return home if they are hit in those spots (Wallis 1980).

An intersectional investigation of what factors into ability forces us not only to consider faculties, but also privileges.

Those of us who are able to secure a place within the current academic system are able to advocate for our own support needs within that system, with a hope of being heard. Internal efforts to make academia accessible address the ‘bullet holes,’ so to speak, that are reported by those who made it. It does not ultimately address the hurdles to access that are faced by those who are not yet included in academia. If we want to look at how accessible academia is, we won’t learn the full extent of our failure by looking at how well we can respond to the access needs of those who made it into academia. When we see that certain voices are missing from academia, we should not assume, as did the military, that there is nothing to hear. Rather, by looking around to see whose voices are missing, we will be confronted with the fact that academia has systematically excluded certain groups from speaking, over and over, to the point where we may not even give a second thought to their *subalternity*.

This is why I am cynical about disability accommodations and accessibility. By addressing the access needs of those it is willing to accommodate – namely, those who could cross the threshold – and rejecting the access needs of those it is unwilling to accommodate, academia can project a fantastical image of accessibility and disability acceptance from within a system that remains structurally ableist. More of us should be cynical and become cognisant of academia’s access exceptionalism. For now, this access exceptionalism benefits us – it has enabled us to be in this space together. But categories like disability are not immutable. The abilities that secured your place in academia are, I am sorry to say, contingent.

No matter how validated we feel in the current system, the very faculties and privileges that allowed us to access academia in the first place could become the very things that leave us vulnerable and out of a job at a

moment's notice. We owe it to every iteration of ourselves – our sick selves, our disabled selves, our burnt-out selves, our pregnant selves, our elderly selves, our marginalised selves – to ensure that our right to speak within academia does not hinge on our consistent capacity to compete in and win academia's ability economy. My hope – my fantasy, if you will – is that in my lifetime, we will be brave enough to accept that ability is not the ultimate determinant of worth.

It is tempting to argue that individual instances of dispensation for disabled people level the playing field, and that extending the same opportunities to nondisabled students would be unfair on disabled students. But this argument is also, in a way, an instance of access exceptionalism. Disability is one factor of many that can shape a person's access needs. By accommodating certain disabled students, academic institutions demonstrate their (albeit limited) capacity for adaptation, enabling certain students to continue to participate – and, in doing so, obscuring the fact that this mode of operation is inherently ableist. I have an hour of extra time for my exams, but what would happen if everyone got an extra hour, regardless of their disability status? Some of my autistic friends are exempt from group work, but what if everybody had the same choice? What if we allowed professional academics to take breaks, and truly rest – not just those who have been forced to take a sabbatical because of burnout?

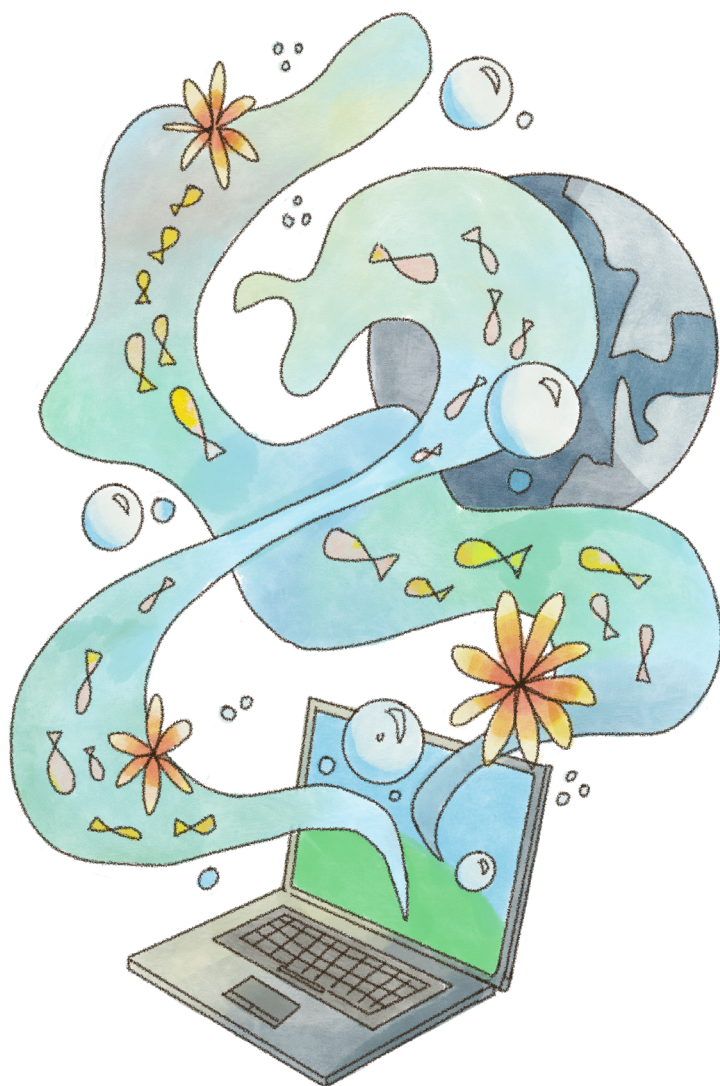
While it may be an administrative nightmare for course coordinators everywhere, I suspect that by removing the pressure to work as hard as we can, and sometimes *harder* than we can, the quality of everyone's work would increase. To me, this would be a true level playing field. If we accept that ability and the factors that influence it are multifaceted, to speak of a level playing field is not to speak of a *topographically even* playing field, but of a landscape that does not inherently disadvantage or exclude those who have a part to play there. As it stands, we are working on a *topographically even* playing field that challenges everyone to the point where many of us are experiencing burnout, and other mental and physical illnesses. Through its failure to accommodate us, academia not only fails to accommodate disabled people, but is disabling people. For those of us who want to stay in academia, advocating for an accessible academia is not only an act of allyship, but is a radical show of love towards our future selves. If we want to stay here, we need to find a way to make an accessible academia feasible.

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Frutiger Aero: A Fantasy of a Better Future

Saar Boter

Abstract: Frutiger Aero denotes an aesthetic trend that prevailed from 2005 to 2014, characterised by distinctive visual attributes and a specific genre of music. This aesthetic conveys a utopian vision of humanity's relationship with technology, envisioning a harmonious integration between technological progress and nature, as well as values associated with environmental sustainability. This article will employ the understudied phenomenon of Frutiger Aero to examine the broader debate surrounding the role of utopian ideals in shaping our technological aspirations. Advocates suggest that such utopias provide a framework to steer rapid and occasionally disorienting technological advancements towards desirable outcomes. However, critics of techno-utopianism argue that these visions risk oversimplifying the intricate challenges within both technological and societal domains. The discourse on the role and relevance of utopias remains vibrant and is likely to persist as technological innovation continues to evolve, which makes the topic highly relevant. The objective of this article is to assess both sides of the debate, and it will ultimately conclude that utopian thought experiments have, perhaps unfairly, been dismissed as mere fantasies without practical application.

Keywords: Frutiger Aero, aesthetic, Philosophy of Technology, technology, utopianism, utopia, techno-utopia, techno-utopianism.

Introduction

Reflections on the development of current-day technologies often tend to be critical, showing an awareness of the consequences that our modern world wishes to avoid. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that most media about futures with a high level of integrated technologies are dystopias (Bina et al. 2020, 6). However, this does raise the question of what we wish our future looked like instead. We can wonder if a world saturated with technologies will inevitably lead to a dystopian state, or whether it would be possible to envision a world where technological advancement aligns with values such as sustainability, equality and balance. Of course, the idea of a world where technology is heavily present but does not harm human life, nor the environment, is not novel. In fact, since the 1990s, the prominence of

so-called techno-utopias has been on the rise, and it is anticipated that their popularity will only continue to grow in the coming years (Dickel & Schrape 2017b, 289).

It is no coincidence that this resurgence aligns with the development of the internet. The internet played several roles in the rising popularity of techno-utopias. For one, the internet allows ideas to travel far and fast (Dickel & Schrape 2017b, 291). Additionally, the mere development of the internet itself caused a wave of 'Internet optimism' (Dickel & Schrape 2017a, 48). After all, its introduction had huge implications. The internet added a whole new dimension to the world as we knew it. These techno-utopias are a subject that divides scholars and scientists. As we will see in the chapters to come, some scholars state that they are nothing more than fantasies about an unrealised future. Others argue that it is possible to extract insights from these utopias.

This article examines the potential value of techno-utopian thought experiments by using a specific example of a techno-utopia—namely, Frutiger Aero, coined by Froyo Tam and Sofi Xian (CARI, n.d.). Frutiger Aero is an aesthetic trend that existed from 2005 to 2014, which was characterised by distinctive visual attributes and a specific genre of music. This aesthetic conveys a utopian vision of humanity's relationship with technology, envisioning a harmonious integration between technological progress and nature, as well as values associated with environmental sustainability. The question central to this debate, and to this article, is whether techno-utopias contain meaningful information that helps us steer technological development away from dystopian futures or whether techno-utopias are ultimately of no genuine utility, and even form a danger.

The structure of this article is as follows: First, I will outline the arguments opposing and supporting the use of techno-utopias. Secondly, I will apply these arguments to the example of Frutiger Aero. Though Frutiger Aero originated as a speculative concept from the early 2000s, its recent resurgence in popularity renders it an interesting case that speaks to young adults today. The objective of this article is to assess both sides of the debate, and it will ultimately conclude that utopian thought experiments have, perhaps unfairly, been dismissed as mere fantasies without practical application. Instead, utopianism can be a useful tool for political debate, citizen inclusion, and a guiding vision for technological development. Nonetheless, as with any analytical tool, utopianism possesses its own inherent limitations, which this article will also address.

Techno-Utopianism

Utopian discourses have been a consistent feature throughout history, with the most notable example being Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Interestingly,

the concept of utopia has always been subject to a 'war of language', since it can be read as 'ou-topia' ('no place') and 'eu-topia' ('good place') (Abensour 2008, 412). This opposition between the two interpretations of the word foreshadows the two sides of the debate on the use of utopias. On one side of the debate, there have been scholars with a desire for utopian transformations. On the other, the scholars have stated that the mere desire for a utopia itself is inherently flawed, as in the end, its realisation would always inevitably lead not to emancipation, but a totalitarian regime (Bina et al. 2020, 3). The line between utopia and dystopia is, therefore, a thin one. Techno-utopias, specifically, represent a distinct subset of utopian thought, where technological advancement plays a crucial role in shaping the vision of the future. While the specific content of these visions may vary, there are discernible patterns across techno-utopias. These patterns can be analysed on three separate levels: ontology, temporality, and sociality (Dickel & Schrape 2017b, 290).

On the ontological level, techno-utopias always challenge existing social structures by proposing alternatives, which are made possible by the emerging technologies specific to the vision. Often a concept of a decentralised and individualised production system is present in the presented alternative, which provides a utopian critique of the industrial model of mass production. This critique then paves the way for the conceptualisation of an alternative, which is seen as an improvement upon the existing status quo (Dickel & Schrape 2017a, 52). A key reference point in contemporary utopian narratives, particularly in the context of our digital modernity, is the figure of the "prosumer" (Dickel & Schrape 2017a, 48-52). The prosumer stands in contrast to the more familiar concept of the consumer. The prosumer society encapsulates a vision of political democratisation, the decentralisation of both production and distribution of material and immaterial goods, and the overall emancipation of consumers, media users, and citizens alike (Dickel & Schrape 2017a, 48). At the temporal level, the distinction between critiquing the present system, and envisioning an alternative, functions as a divide between the past and the future. The present is regarded as a critical juncture, a moment of transition in which existing structures can be dismantled, enabling the realisation of future possibilities. Finally, on the social level, the advocates of emerging technologies often position themselves as public intellectuals, claiming to possess crucial insights into the future (Dickel & Schrape 2017a, 52-53).

These attributes on the levels of ontology, temporality, and sociality form the red thread between the different visions of the specifics of techno-utopias. These characteristics form the basis of the arguments opponents and proponents present in defence of their position.

Opponents

As stated in the introduction, techno-utopianism has many opponents who question the added value of its thought experiments. This chapter will highlight several main points of this critique. The first point of criticism pertains to an inherent issue observed in utopias: they are always “present futures” (Dickel & Schrape 2017b, 291). What this means is that utopias consistently present a vision of the future as imagined from today’s perspective. However, we never truly reach that envisioned future; it is fundamental to the definition of utopias that they remain out of reach. Thus, critics question the purpose of engaging with concepts that we will never realise. Based on this critical point, one can wonder what use utopias have if we are aware that the worlds they foster are unattainable. Based on this, Nordmann (2014) argues that we gain no real substantial knowledge in reflecting on these utopias (quoted in Dickel & Schrape 2017b, 292).

The main goal of people that utilise techno-utopias is not to find a way to that utopian future. Instead, their goal is to use that vision to gain funding and support in the present.

The second point that opponents present is that techno-utopias tend to simplify technological issues as well as social ones. Visions of the future often do not have to take current societal conditions into account, as they take place in the future (Smeltzer 2020, 125). The drawback is that we are not given a road map that shows us how to get to that future. This is the issue that critics have with techno-utopias. The main goal of people that utilise techno-utopias is not to find a way to that utopian future. Instead, their goal is to use that vision to gain funding and support in the present (Dickel & Schrape 2017b, 291). When it comes to the simplification of technologies, indeed, techno-utopias often remain vague regarding how certain technologies really work and, due to this ambiguity, different techno-utopian narratives can be linked to each other without any repercussions. To illustrate this, Dickel and Schrape (2017b) note an example by Kurzweil (2005), where “visions of genetic engineering, molecular nanotechnology and artificial intelligence are tied together into an overarching narrative of accelerating change and an impending technological ‘singularity’” (quoted in Dickel & Schrape 2017b, 291). In addition to the practical shortcomings of having a concrete vision for the development of technology, this attitude clashes with characteristics of the contemporary field of philosophy of technology as well. One of those main characteristics is that philosophers make their work

specific to one technology, as opposed to talking about Technology (“with a capital T”) like philosophers have done in the past. Keeping techno-utopias vague and allowing them to be applicable to many different technologies is at odds with the sentiment of our current thoughts about how we should think about technology.

Then, a third and last main critical point of techno-utopias is that they are vulnerable to window-dressing (Hoffman et al. 2024, 15). We see this especially in issues pertaining to technology as the solution to environmental problems. In this context, the specific issue of window-dressing is often referred to as “greenwashing”. By utilising the fact that utopias can afford to make false promises to gain attention and funding, using the present fears of the future of our environment and the promises to alleviate this anxiety is a powerful tool, though not always ethically sound. Here we can see an example of a scenario where techno-utopias are not only useless in providing a road map to a better future, their use in greenwashing and false promises forms an actual danger.

Proponents

Granted, the criticism that we have seen so far raises valid points against taking techno-utopianism seriously as a scientist or scholar. However, proponents are not concerned about the lack of practical application techno-utopias serve. Instead, they argue that they never had the illusion that the purpose of techno-utopias was a road map to the future.

Indeed, proponents of techno-utopias argue that the goal of using techno-utopias in science has been interpreted incorrectly. We have seen that critics argue that, because utopias are inherently a present future, there is no useful information we could derive from these scenarios. However, proponents argue that a more hermeneutic approach to techno-utopias is in order (Selin 2014 quoted in Dickel & Schrape 2017b, 292). Instead of expecting an analysis of techno-utopias to deliver concrete knowledge about the future of technological development, the hermeneutic approach would be able to offer us insights concerning responsibility and the concept of innovation, in addition to important values that are present in these expectations about our future. It can help us think outside the box about alternative possibilities for the future (Levitass 2010, 542; Bina et al. 2020, 3). Utopias are not meant to be seen as predictions of future developments or technological advancements. Rather, they serve as narratives that provide guidance on the uncertainties and conflicts shaping contemporary society (Dickel & Schrape 2017a, 48).

Second, techno-utopias can be a powerful tool to engage in conversations about societal issues amongst other citizens. When we look at the climate crisis, we often see that the discussion remains close to factual information.

Not often is there place for affect and other soft aspects of citizen engagement in the debate. Not only does this exclusion restrict the scope of mapping the problem and determining what is at stake, it also negatively impacts the quality of democratic life (Hoffman et al. 2024, 1). After all, utopias reveal what people value, and encourage them to share what is important to them. Citizen engagement is an important step in solving complex problems such as the climate crisis. It might seem like an obvious truth, but we tend to forget how important it is for people to feel like they can participate in collective processes and play a role in questioning the dominant frames and in shaping the future (Hoffman et al. 2024, 13). Therefore, allowing these softer aspects like affect to have a place in the discussion through utopian thought experiments, allows for a deepening of the democratic engagement with our future (Hoffman et al. 2024, 13). Hoffman and his colleagues observed that allowing for emotional experience in the discussion of sustainability had a positive effect on inclusion. In turn, inclusion allows the incorporation of different views from different people with their own backgrounds, which is very useful in tackling an issue that will eventually affect every person on the planet. Even though the different standpoints of citizens are not direct solutions like developing more sustainable ways to live our lives on Earth, the insights derived from these standpoints are the root of new ideas and solutions, and they critically assess the worldview of the scientists working on possible solutions. These thought experiments allow us to temporarily step outside of the box.

After all, utopias reveal what people value, and encourage them to share what is important to them.

In using utopianism as a tool of thinking outside of the constraints of the society's current framework, it allows us to expose the limitations of current policy discussions about, for example, economic growth and ecological sustainability (Hoffman et al. 2024, 2). The limits set around the traditional debates and styles of public participation often fail to include discussions that take place on a deeper level, which are important discussions that are needed for changes to the system, one's worldview, values, or paradigms (3). In addition to transcending the limitations of our current system, utopias also allow for a different relation to the future: one where we see the future as a collective object of care and as a space of possibility (4). It is important, Hoffman notes, to present the future as a domain of contestation, not (just) one of consent (Hofmann et al. 2024, 13). The fact that conversations about utopias are seemingly detached from current day politics is also a strong characteristic. Of course, conversations about our future are political, even

if specific politicians and plans are not discussed. However, Hoffman et al. (2024) suggests that the apparent lack of overt political engagement can make utopias less intimidating when addressing thorny issues. This very characteristic, paradoxically, allows them to be potentially deeply political, as people are less hesitant to share their ideas, providing a great platform for debate and reflection on complex societal challenges (15).

In conclusion, techno-utopianism occupies a complex position in contemporary discourse, simultaneously inspiring both critique and advocacy. While critics underscore its inherent limitations—such as its status as an unattainable present future, its tendency to oversimplify technological and societal issues, and its vulnerability to performative "window-dressing"—proponents highlight its potential to deepen societal engagement and foster critical reflection. By envisioning alternatives to existing structures, techno-utopias challenge the status quo and invite debate on innovation, responsibility, and shared values. Furthermore, they offer a framework for engaging with complex issues such as climate change by fostering citizen participation, emotional engagement, and critical discussion. Ultimately, techno-utopias should not be seen as definitive predictions but as tools for navigating uncertainties and envisioning futures that transcend current limitations.

Frutiger Aero as a Techno Utopia

The term Frutiger Aero refers to a visual aesthetic that was prominent in digital design during the mid-to-late 2000s. Frutiger Aero is named after the Swiss typeface designer Adrian Frutiger, whose sans-serif typeface became a well-known example of clean, user-friendly design, and Windows Aero (Fandom 2024a). Frutiger Aero encapsulates a style that evokes simplicity, optimism, and a technologically driven, hopeful future. It often centres around a balance between nature and technology, sustainable technology and clear and lively oceans. Mentions of Frutiger Aero in academic discourse are quite literally absent. The singular mention of this phenomenon comes forward in a paper on architecture by Emirhan Avci (2024). However, this does not mean that there is no information on the phenomenon at all. A website called 'Aesthetics Wiki' has documented, amongst many others, this phenomenon, and serves as a thorough collection of examples from media and advertising, providing descriptions and images of different products. This article will use the information from this website to create an account of Frutiger Aero's main characteristics.

Characteristics

Frutiger Aero is defined by its use of rounded, glossy shapes, clean lines, and a smooth, gradient-filled colour palette. This style incorporates elements such as transparent bubbles, reflections, and soft gradients, often in hues of blue and green, evoking a modern, hygienic aesthetic (Fandom 2024a). The look is notably characterised by the use of glossy effects that mimic the textures of glass or liquid, a design choice often applied to icons, buttons, and backgrounds. The aesthetic of Frutiger Aero can be seen as part of a broader visual trend from the 2000s that favoured bright, friendly visuals over complex or heavily textured designs. A significant influence on Frutiger Aero's development can be traced to the rising popularity of skeuomorphic design in digital interfaces, wherein elements are designed to resemble real-world objects or textures (Fandom 2024b). This trend, coupled with the influence of technological advancements like high-resolution screens and improved graphics rendering, allowed for a higher degree of realism and polish in digital design. The look is somewhat analogous to the design philosophy seen in Windows Vista's Aero interface, which utilised similar glossy, glass-like motifs. However, Frutiger Aero leans more into organic shapes and playful colours, giving it a softer and more approachable feel. In this sense, Frutiger Aero functions as a bridge between the highly skeuomorphic design of the early 2000s and the minimalist, flat design that would dominate the 2010s (Fandom 2024a). Common motifs within Frutiger Aero include rounded icons, light reflections, water droplets, and abstract shapes floating in gradient backgrounds. Unlike minimalist aesthetics that followed, Frutiger Aero does not shy away from colour saturation and depth, preferring a more tactile approach that invites interaction.

Frutiger Aero remains a distinctive chapter in digital design history. Its glossy surfaces, gradient backgrounds, and tactile features serve as a reminder of a time when digital aesthetics were characterised by optimism, hope, and inclusivity. Though no longer mainstream, Frutiger Aero's influence persists subtly, marking a formative period in the evolution of digital interfaces and providing a foundation upon which later design philosophies would build (Fandom 2024a).

Vision of Our Future

Frutiger Aero reflects the *Zeitgeist* of the mid-2000s—a period marked by enthusiasm for technological progress and digital innovation (Dickel and Schrape 2017a, 48). With the rapid proliferation of personal computers, smartphones, and user-centric digital experiences, design trends began to prioritise accessibility, warmth, and friendliness. The underlying ethos of Frutiger Aero also ties into the broader notion of techno-optimism, a mindset

that pervaded digital culture in the 2000s. This optimism was fuelled by the excitement surrounding advancements in communication, multimedia, and computing capabilities. Design aesthetics, in turn, reflected these aspirations, aiming to make technology appear as an integral, almost organic part of daily life. By employing vibrant colours, sleek forms, and inviting textures, Frutiger Aero contributed to a vision of technology that was not only functional but also friendly and reassuring. Frutiger Aero embodies these values, offering an aesthetic that feels both advanced and welcoming. It suggests a future that is clean, efficient, and bright, aligning well with the aspirations of tech giants like Microsoft, Apple, and Google, who were all experimenting with glossy, skeuomorphic interfaces at the time.

Taking Frutiger Aero as an example, what potential value might a techno-utopia such as this add to our conceptualisation of the future with technology? To address this question, it is first necessary to examine how Frutiger Aero withstands its critics. Indeed, Frutiger Aero epitomised a "present future," a characteristic that is, regrettably, intrinsic to all utopias. While the vision centred on the future of technology, it has remained confined to the past. The recent resurgence in its popularity can, however, be attributed to the fact that after twenty years, the children who grew up during this time period now are old enough to feel nostalgia for it. Thus, Frutiger Aero is not firmly anchored in reality. Strictly speaking, criticisms regarding its tendency to oversimplify technological and social problems are not directly applicable. However, this is primarily because the aesthetic's vision for the world and technological development is so vague that it fails to engage with these issues in any meaningful way. Frutiger Aero merely creates a feeling for how the future could feel like. One of the most valid critiques in the case of Frutiger Aero is that techno-utopias are susceptible to greenwashing. During the period when this aesthetic was prominently reflected in technological design, we can wonder if values such as sustainability were prioritised in the strategic agendas of the companies developing these technologies. Even today, these values often remain secondary, as economic advancement continues to be regarded as a more significant objective.

While using utopianism in guiding contemporary advancements presents challenges, this does not imply that the concept should be dismissed outright, as no methodology is entirely free from drawbacks or limitations. It is, therefore, worth exploring the potential contributions of a utopia such as Frutiger Aero. Admittedly, Frutiger Aero cannot provide a detailed roadmap towards a specific future; however, like proponents of utopianism have brought up, this may not be its primary purpose. Instead, it embodies core values that can serve as guiding principles for current decision-making.

On the one hand, opponents would criticise Frutiger Aero because it fails to meaningfully capture the intricacies of technologies and social structures. On the other hand, Frutiger Aero's deliberate vagueness could be more useful than attempting to capture something so complicated. Instead, this vagueness serves to keep the future open to interpretation, possibility and change. Rather than offering specific goals or visions, it conveys certain core values, like sustainability, equality and balance, and evokes a particular sentiment about what the future should embody. These values can be characterised as the belief in achieving a harmonious balance between nature and technology. This includes advocating for the use of clean energy and the adoption of sustainable practices to minimise pollution and safeguard the environment. These ideals are particularly evident in a sub-aesthetic of Frutiger Aero, referred to as Frutiger Eco (Fandom 2024c). Visual representations of futuristic cities within this framework underscore the aspiration for a sustainable and unpolluted future. Additionally, the aesthetic's friendly and open design elements reflect a desire for inclusivity and approachability. These stylistic choices suggest a future that is not only technologically advanced, but also welcoming and equitable, embodying values that resonate with a diverse and interconnected society (Fandom 2024a).

Maybe we simply need the opportunity to imagine that a better future is possible.

With these values, along with a collection of music and images that capture how the future should *feel*, Frutiger Aero can perfectly serve as a techno-utopia that captures what a positive future saturated with technology could look like. Techno-utopias are a powerful tool for thinking outside the box. They speak to the imagination and inspire dialogue between people. When developing a certain technology, we can ask ourselves if we are moving in a direction that would bring us closer to feeling like we are walking on the rolling hills of Windows XP, or whether its effects would take us away from it. Of course, no one ever really arrives in Utopia. But perhaps we do not need a road map to a world that does not exist. Maybe we simply need the opportunity to imagine that a better future is possible.

Conclusion

The exploration of Frutiger Aero as a techno-utopia underscores the multifaceted role that utopian thought experiments can play in shaping our perceptions of technology and the future. While criticisms of techno-utopias as overly simplistic, vague, or performative are valid, these critiques do not diminish their potential value. For example, Frutiger Aero exemplifies how

a utopian vision, despite its lack of practical specificity, can serve as a vessel for expressing core values such as sustainability, inclusivity, and harmony between nature and technology. Of course, there are limits and pitfalls to using utopias to guide technological development, like greenwashing and the simplification of technological and social problems. However, Frutiger Aero offers a glimpse into an aspirational future where technology integrates seamlessly into daily life while remaining approachable and environmentally conscious. Though Frutiger Aero does not provide actionable strategies for achieving such a future, it fosters dialogue and reflection on the kind of future we want to create. By engaging with these ideals, society can leverage the evocative power of utopias to guide technological innovation, inspire collective action, and deepen public discourse. Though they must be used with caution, Frutiger Aero and other techno-utopias should not be dismissed as mere fantasies or nostalgic relics without any purpose. Instead, they should be regarded as cultural artifacts that reflect and shape societal aspirations, providing a framework to critique the present and imagine better alternatives for the future. After all, Frutiger Aero might be exactly the fantasy we need in this reality.

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SPLIJTSTOF



CRISPR and the Fantasy of Human Immortality

Using Imagination to Assess this Possibility

Susana Reis

Abstract: Throughout history, human imagination has conceived the desire for immortality in various symbolic forms: gods who never die were envisioned, writing was invented to immortalize ideas, timeless values were contested, immutable laws of life and morality were established, alchemical solutions for eternal youth were pursued, and beliefs in an afterlife were cultivated. However, for the first time in human history, we possess a technology—CRISPR-Cas9—that is precise enough in altering DNA sequences to open the scientific possibility of delaying or even reversing cellular aging, finally enabling us to literally attain human immortality. While this remains a mere promise for now, it marks the first time that humanity holds the potential to materialize this ancient myth.

But how can we evaluate whether achieving this goal is ethically desirable? To do so, I propose to: 1) scrutinize whether, or to what extent, death defines what it means to be human. Here, I will draw upon Heidegger's concept of "being-toward-death" and the relationship he establishes between human freedom and mortality; 2) employ Heidegger's hermeneutic methodology to understand the underlying ideas, assumptions, and value hierarchies behind this collective fantasy, in order to critically assess it; 3) use the faculty of imagination as the ability to distance oneself from the present and one's first-person-perspective, anticipating potential scenarios—within the limits of our transcendental conditions—to consider possible consequences of altering the biological substrate of our species. Ultimately, I aim to establish a framework of reasoning that enables us to engage in forward-looking responsibility.

Unfolding the Problem

CRISPR-Cas9, a relatively recent discovery by Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna, sparked a revolution in medicine in 2013 by enabling new treatments for genetic diseases. In addition to cutting specific sections within the sequential code of the human genome—targeting information that is external or unwanted—this new biotechnology enables the replacement of the malformed sequence with a complementary, optimized one. A level of precision, therefore, incomparably superior to previous genetic editing techniques. Currently, several CRISPR-based treatments are underway, and

their success in combating genetic diseases has led to heightened expectations, surpassing the initially defined therapeutic goals, and raising the prospect of targeting death itself. Since death is also a physiological process linked to the instructions of the human genome, it has been seen as another problem that might be addressed through CRISPR's corrective possibilities. This specific procedure, however, would involve the manipulation of germline cells (not just somatic cells), which makes the risks associated with using CRISPR for this purpose very high. For this reason, the scientific community has not yet deemed the practice viable. But what if the manipulation of germline cells eventually becomes safe? Should we use CRISPR then to eliminate the necessity of death?

To answer this, I propose that we first examine the intellectual context that raised the possibility of using this biotechnology not only to correct genetic disorders within individuals but also to enhance the human condition as a whole. By enhancement, I mean altering structures that are perfectly functional, and yet fall short of our current standards. Second, it is necessary to consider whether, and to what extent, mortality defines what it means to be human. Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics, along with his existential interpretation of death, provides a solid theoretical foundation for exploring these two subtopics.

With that in mind, the structure of the essay will be as follows: I will begin by exploring Heidegger's hermeneutic methodology as defined in *Being and Time*, focusing on his views regarding the ontological and epistemic structure of human beings as *Dasein*, as beings-in-the-world. *Being and Time* is, I believe, an invitation to a kind of self-reflection that looks *not* inward (at the relationships between inner representations), but outward—to the historical context in which our beliefs and desires are shaped and take form. This is the reason why we will be looking at the (intellectual) context in which the possibility of using CRISPR to defy human mortality was raised in the first place. By hermeneutically examining it, one should be able to uncover—and, most importantly, question—the hierarchy of values and traditions of thought that might be hidden behind the quest for human immortality. And this should be enough to put us in a stronger epistemic position when evaluating this issue and the potential applications of CRISPR to address it.

Further, I will examine Heidegger's connection between human freedom and death, contrasting it with the prevailing commonsense understanding of mortality. Only after this layered approach should one be sufficiently equipped to make full use of the faculty of imagination—that is, to distance oneself from the present and one's first-person perspective—in order to anticipate the possible consequences of altering the biological substrate of our species.

Hermeneutics as the Theoretical Methodology for Beings-in-the-World

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger questioned whether our fundamental encounter with reality is primarily theoretical, establishing instead the priority of practical behavior within our own ontological structure. According to him, as beings-in-the-world, or as *Da-sein* (being-there), humans are originally «thrown» into a set of practical, historical and worldly circumstances that structurally affect—by making possible—their further capacity to think or theorize. This perspective actively seeks to relate all forms of thinking to the practical possibilities of the body and the social history of humankind. In Heidegger's words: "The theoretical mode of behaviour toward the world arises out of taking care of things at hand [...]. The theoretical discovery of innerworldly beings arises out of being in the world" (Heidegger 1996, 338).

The primacy of *Dasein*'s practical behavior over theoretical aims, among other things, to highlight the non-subjective and pre-theoretical conditions of thought. That is, it seeks not only to address how the mind constitutes (or—to use Heidegger's forbidden word—"represents") the world, but also how the world constitutes the mind. Here, the subject no longer stands opposed to reality as an object but is, rather, always already inseparable from its structures of reference.¹ The world serves, then, as an *a priori* from which we cannot simply withdraw. And for Heidegger, that means there is no such thing as an interpretation without presuppositions: when we come into the world, we are thrown into a set of cultural practices, realities of objects, a web of language, and traditions of thought that establish a coherent foundation of collectively shared assumptions, which shape and form the reality that we are confronted with.

This results in a hermeneutics that is not only methodological (encouraging us to understand knowledge and linguistic meanings in their temporal evolution) but also ontological, grounded in the premise that *our structure of understanding is itself historically rooted* due to our primarily affective and pre-theoretical engagement with the world (Heidegger 1996, 338).² To put it bluntly: Heidegger does not subscribe to the possibility of epistemic neutra-

1 See, for example, Heidegger, M. *A Origem da Obra de Arte*, p. 35: "[T]he world is always the non-objective realm to which we are embedded" (Heidegger 2002b, 35 my translation).

2 See, for example, Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*, §70, p.338: "[B]oth the self-interpretation of *Dasein* and the content of significance of language are to a large extent dominated by spatial representations in general. This priority of the spatial in the articulation of significations and concepts has its origin not in some specific power of space, but rather in the kind of being of *Dasein*" (Heidegger 1996, 338).

lity, asserting that all forms of understanding—including scientific understanding—are conditioned by ontological assumptions that precede the very act of theorizing (Heidegger 1996, 338).³

This specific account of knowledge in general, and science in particular, is highly relevant in the context of this paper, as it aims to analyze one of the foremost scientific advancements (CRISPR) and its potential future applications. That said, I am by no means suggesting that we should view or approach science as a social ideology disguised as principles of rigorous methodology. As Edgar Morin (1990) aptly points out, while it is true that “scientific knowledge cannot be isolated from its conditions of development”, it also “cannot be reduced to those conditions” (25).⁴ What is then meant to be underscored, and always grounded in Heideggerian hermeneutics, is the recognition of the complex interaction between our theoretical behavior and the fact that we are *Dasein*—beings that act and think within a worldly and intersubjective context.

The Non-Scientific Presuppositions Behind a Scientific Quest To Overcome Human Mortality

A pioneer in investigating the use of CRISPR to tackle death is the renowned, though highly controversial, scientist George Church, who aims to genetically reverse the cellular process of human aging. As I previously mentioned, this procedure is not yet safe enough for the scientific community to accept it. But let's assume that, in a few years, it does become safe. Should this biotechnology be used solely to cure and prevent diseases in specific individuals, or should it initiate a new collective process of enhancing the human condition as such (which the achievement of immortality would obviously set in motion)? The underlying problem when addressing this dilemma has already been presented. We should ask ourselves: what worldly context might have sparked the scientific ambition to use CRISPR in the quest for immortality; what are the constituent values or traditions of thought behind it, and in what ways might they be questioned?

I would like to propose that this expectation reflects at least two fundamental aspects that Heidegger, throughout his work, identifies as characteristic of the modern mentality: 1) the system of ideas that distinguishes

3 See Ibid. §69, p.338: "Scientific behavior, as a way of being in the world is not a purely intellectual activity [...]. It is by no means obvious the ontological boundary between theoretical and non-theoretical behavior really lies" (Heidegger 1996, 338).

4 My own translation. Original: "La connaissance scientifique ne saurait s'isoler de ses conditions d'élaborations. Mais elle ne saurait être réduite à ces conditions" (Morin 1990, 25).

subjects from objects, which solidified the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric worldview that “displaced and uprooted humankind from the Earth” (Heidegger 1981) and 2) the linear vision of progress as an infinite process (Heidegger 1977; Heidegger 1981). Let’s break down these two ideas.

What worldly context might have sparked the scientific ambition to use CRISPR in the quest for immortality: what are the constituent values or traditions of thought behind it, and in what ways might they be questioned?

First, the hope to free humanity from its biological constraints denotes a deeply rooted cultural belief that humans, at a fundamental level, are not like animals. Despite all scientific evidence (since Darwin, complicating the possibility of conceiving cognition as purely mental and independent of the body), the belief that our physical, animal properties have little or no relevance to us, rational beings, has led us to naively believe in a future where we might live without our bodies. This could mean replacing our bodies with others, less imperfect because biologically less constrained (the approach that George Church suggests with CRISPR), or even creating a form of existence totally independent of any physical substrate (*Neuralink*, one of the world’s leading companies in biotechnology development, is currently working on brain-computer interfaces aimed not only at achieving super-intelligence but also at creating purely mental forms of immortality by “downloading” minds into virtual structures). Although Heidegger is not here to witness these interesting events, one could certainly argue that he would not like them, and would blame Western history of ideas (yes, again!). Throughout his work, he stated several times that the legacy of Western thought has created an artificial rift between human beings and nature (see, for example: Heidegger 1996, 338): beginning with Plato and Aristotle, who removed the philosophers from the world so that they could contemplate it in isolation, this idea evolved in modern epistemology through the “transcendentalization” of the subject, where its access to the objects of experience would never correspond to the objects themselves but to the way the human mind was structured to perceive and represent the world. Reality was thus reduced to the status of an “image”, a representation or a mere reflection of our minds (Heidegger 2002a, 144). According to him, this history of ideas ultimately culminated in Nietzsche, whose concept of “will to power” established the necessity for the subject to perceive, interpret, and engage

with reality exclusively through the lens of its own interests (Heidegger 2002c, 273-5). And it was precisely in response to this tradition that Heidegger emphasized the practical and pre-theoretical roots of thought, aiming to bridge the artificial division between subject and object, human and reality, mind and world, reason and animality.

Heidegger (1977) also pointed out how the notion of progress, as a perpetual motion of looking forward, whose constant push for innovation is entirely indifferent to the perfect functionality of the object(s) at stake, has become a fundamental principle of modern mentality. Everything is instrumentally valued according to its potential for exchange, obeying to the “rigor of advancing” whose ultimate end is never to reach an end (6-9, 14-6). The project of addressing human death by altering biological structures that function perfectly as they are can be seen as a replication of this generalized way of “enframing” the world,⁵ where we begin to view ourselves as objects to be exchanged and upgraded to newer versions—without anyone questioning why or for what purpose. One might argue, however, that the goal is clear: to elevate the human condition beyond mere satisfaction, turning it into something ‘better’. But what does ‘better’ truly mean in this context? Why would immortality be preferable to mortality? While this might seem intuitively simple to answer, this demands a deeper examination, especially before committing to such a profound and collective transformation in our species. We should first consider what purpose death serves. Heidegger offers an answer to this question, though it is one that invites debate. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring his perspective as a starting point.

The Problematic of Death and Freedom

Heidegger conceives human ontological structure—and consequently, its mode of understanding—as inherently historically situated: humans act and think within a context whose conditions they do not control. To use Heidegger’s (1996) words “[*Dasein*] actually discovers and discloses [...] always within the limits of its thrownness” (334). But if this is the case, that is, if our way of acting and thinking is conditioned by the worldly circumstances in which we find ourselves, how can we acquire any form of freedom?

Unlike other beings, which are typically entirely conditioned by present stimuli and given circumstances, *Dasein* has the unique capacity to grasp temporality and to anticipate possibilities that are not yet actualised (it is this ability to understand the ecstatic nature of temporality that would, according to Heidegger, enable us to inhabit the realm of ontology, rather

5 For a better understanding of the Heideggerian notion of *Enframing* (*Gestell*) see Heidegger 1977, 20.

than being limited to mere ontic existence). Crucially, this kind of understanding is not merely theoretical but affective: it is through experiencing anxiety while facing the possibility of death that *Dasein* is driven to make choices. Why? Because acknowledging finitude means acknowledging that *not* all possibilities can be accomplished. The simple awareness that our lives are constrained in both time and space forces us to choose which possibilities we will pursue. Without it, Heidegger (1996) believes, we would “fall” into the endless everyday tasks, never being compelled to define our own purposes (255). Because of this, our most authentic way of being is defined as projecting ourselves toward the most radical possibility of non-being (232). In other words, it is through the anticipation of death that Heidegger believes we are called to be ourselves, in our most authentic way (243).

It is through experiencing anxiety while facing the possibility of death that Dasein is driven to make choices.

However, could one not argue exactly the opposite? Isn't it true that our finite condition drastically limits our experience of freedom? The reality is that we inevitably end up abandoning various goals that we might find valuable, simply because we know we will one day have to die. If we never had to face death, no option would ever need to be truly excluded—merely postponed. In a sense, the desire for immortality reflects a human drive to attain a fuller, renewed experience of freedom, free from the constraints of finitude. Throughout history, human imagination has expressed this desire for immortality in numerous symbolic forms: immortal gods were envisioned, writing was invented to eternalize ideas, timeless values were sought, immutable moral laws were established, alchemical solutions for eternal youth were pursued, and beliefs in an afterlife were cultivated. Given the diversity of these examples and the clear contextual differences among them, I would still suggest a common thread running through them: a natural human inclination to endow life, which is necessarily changeable and perishable, with an immutable and enduring meaning. Indeed, building and investing intensely in what will one day be reduced to nothing seems an absurdity that cries out for correction. Nevertheless—and especially considering the insights we already encountered—a more nuanced analysis of the problem may lead us to question this conclusion before accepting it as final.

Why Imagination Matters

It is difficult to identify a compelling objection to George Church's project, especially if we are presented, for instance, with the possibility of reversing our own inevitable loss of muscular strength over time or slowing, or even avoiding, all forms of biological decline. We all wish to preserve the health, vigor, and beauty that youth provides, and to deny this is to show a complete unawareness of the sufferings of aging and death. From a strictly individual perspective, it seems indeed absurd to reject the possibility of an optimized body and extended quality of life. However, I would argue that this should not be the standpoint from which this issue is analyzed. The enhancement of the human species concerns all of humanity—not the subjective limits of individual interests.

We must therefore take a step toward broadening this perspective to make it politically viable. It is in this sense that I choose to methodologically draw on an Arendtian use of the faculty of imagination—in order to envision the problem from a viewpoint that is not strictly private or individual.⁶ Only in this way, I believe, can we assess the legitimacy of such a project. We must then turn to our imagination to carefully reflect on a scenario that, in almost all domains, is profoundly difficult for us to conceive. For this reason, I do not intend to catalog all the possibilities that this kind of enhancement of our species might lead to. The problem of scenarios that are entirely inconceivable to the human imagination is a fundamental epistemic issue and a cognitive limitation with which we all must contend. Thus, the goal is only to think politically about the hypothesis at hand and test, within the limits of our transcendental conditions, its degree of validity. Even if, for now, we are more prepared to pose questions than to offer definitive answers.

Imagining the Counterfactual: What Would It Be Like to Be Immortal?

Assuming that immortality would simply mean continuing to live as we, mortals, do—only forever—is, at the very least, a precipitate expectation. A

6 Hannah Arendt draws on Kantian considerations of aesthetic judgment, and in particular on the a priori principle of common sense (*sensus communis*), in order to develop a theory of judgment perfectly suited to a political or representative way of thinking, which in turn leads to an agency oriented within a context of plurality. In summary terms, reflective judgment corresponds to an imaginative exercise of human cognition that allows one to transcend the privacy of the situational conditions of the person who judges, in order to test the universal validity that a given purpose claims for itself. How? By (imaginatively) recreating perspectives external to one's own, thus attempting to begin thinking from these new circumstances.

being whose existential condition is constantly perpetuated would be fundamentally different from us. Different in how it decides, thinks, and lives. Different in the most essential aspects of being. In the essay “Ageless Bodies and Happy Souls”, Leon Kass (2003) points to the following problem: “What would relationships between different generations be like if there never came a point at which a son surpassed his father in strength and vigor? What incentive would there be for the old to make way for the younger? [...] One cannot think about improving the vitality of the elderly without delaying the maturation of the young” (25). Following this argument, the scientist goes so far as to claim that the conquest of immortality is, ultimately, incompatible with the need for procreation and the renewal of the human species. In this case, I suggest we reflect a little on the consequences of such a change.

If, from an evolutionary standpoint, humans have had, until now, a biological drive to continue the renewal of the species, what would it mean to modify this structure? The possibility of not maintaining the necessity of procreation—which also underpins, in the human world, the institution of the family—would undoubtedly bring consequences that go beyond the strictly biological realm. All descendants are, in the early stages, entirely dependent on the care and attention of their parents, a moment that represents the most immediate and elemental expression of “altruism” (forgive the anthropomorphism) in the animal kingdom. If procreation, understood as one of the main biological drives for cooperation within species, was no longer necessary, wouldn't it be possible for these new “humans” to end up erasing from their interactions and psychological dispositions any principles of solidarity, concern, and responsibility for others?

This is not about reducing the entirety of the human world to the common trait of biology, but rather acknowledging that the opposition between man and animal, culture and nature (directly inherited from the tradition of Western thought that Heidegger was particularly critical of), may be, in fact, much more simplistic than it initially appears. With this, I do *not* intend to deny that we are indeed an exceptional species. But the idea of our exceptionalism becomes problematic when we deny the fact that much of the quality of our experiences derives from a bodily and biological substrate that we share with other animals (Challenger 2021).

The realm of culture is not constructed independently of the realm of nature, nor should humanity be understood through an insular conception of itself. On the contrary, humanity and nature intersect in a complex and open unity regarding their principles of organization. A change in our biological condition would necessarily result in a change on a social, anthropological, and cultural level. What kind of relationships could we expect from immortal individuals, equally strong and healthy, with no expected point

of degeneration? Would any form of cooperation and social cohesion still be justified? And what about private relationships, romantic and familial ones? Would we truly be willing to spend eternity by the side of the very same people? Would the possibility of instituting family units remain intact?

No answer to these questions is meant to be unequivocal. We are far from understanding a situation that bears no resemblance to any previous historical circumstances. To some extent, one might admit that the arrival of the post-human would truly bring about “the end of history”, in the sense of human interactions as we know them. Living with our finitude has been a condition for almost everything we have done as a species. The awareness of death led us to create objects and institutions durable enough to surpass the perishability of life and the transience of being. Worthy of immortality were the most distinctive works and deeds, inscribed in the collective memory of human communities and passed down from generation to generation. The desire to make permanent what, by nature, is fleeting and transitory stems from this ultimate certainty that everything is perishable. Hannah Arendt (2018) explicitly stated that: “All of culture begins with this kind of world making, which in Aristotelian terms is already an *atanatidzein*, a making-immortal” (188) in order to preserve what is destined to disappear. Following this train of thought one might ask here: What would happen to the human world if immortality were guaranteed to us? Would there be art? Would there be culture?

To some extent, one might admit that the arrival of the post-human would truly bring about “the end of history”, in the sense of human interactions as we know them.

On this matter, I have to return to Heidegger and the relationship he established between human mortality and freedom. He said that *Dasein* is compelled to choose its own possibilities in the face of the awareness that not everything can be done. It is the elimination of possibilities—and the choice of one’s own—prompted by the awareness of finitude that ultimately reveals *Dasein*’s freedom. To illustrate the relevance of this point, I suggest we think, in our own terms, about the choices we have been led to make throughout our lives. Consider, for example, the moment you decided to pursue a specific course of study, choose a certain job, start a family with a particular person, travel to a specific place, etc., and ask yourself the following question: Are all these decisions solely the result of each individual’s natural preferences and inclinations, or do they, in fact, reflect a constant

awareness of the irreversible passage of time and the need to accomplish things before time runs out? To me at least, it seems very plausible that one of the main reasons we endure the inconvenience of choosing one path over another is that we know our options are limited.

The possibility of choice, with all the sense of loss it entails, is, if not proof, at least the ultimate experience of free will as we understand it. But, when (practically) everything becomes possible to be accomplished, choosing becomes (almost) unnecessary. Altering the relevant semantics of what it means to make a choice would therefore be equivalent to altering the content of the most intimate and private expression of what it means to be free. An immortal life would perhaps entail the equalization of all our experiences because options would no longer be what they inherently are: dilemmas, moments of reflection and mirrors of subjective preferential hierarchies, which propel us into an action-oriented logic and a search for individual meaning.

Many philosophers (including Heidegger) have considered the notion of the “self” as a reflection of the choices that an individual makes throughout their life (thus opposing, to use our author’s terminology, the “inauthenticity of the anonymous and unchosen possibilities of the everyday Man” (Heidegger 1996, 255). Regardless of whether this is true or not, we have to question ourselves how we would feel if we no longer had to make actual choices. Perhaps we would truly lose an essential part of our personal identity. Moreover, the hypothesis of a generalized lethargy among these imagined immortal beings seems quite plausible to me: What would these individuals actually be willing to do in the absence of time’s pressure, when even we, mortal beings with limited lives, often feel the urge to delay everything?

In the absence of answers to all these questions, I believe that more than discussing the democratization of access to means for us to collectively become immortal beings, it is imperative to question the desirability and legitimacy of this very end, using our imagination to reflect on who we are and who we want to become. Above all, it is important to understand the genesis of our social representations, the beliefs we participate in, and the desires we collectively nourish, so that we can properly evaluate and question them with the necessary distance. Finally, it is urgent that we discuss them impartially and clearly with our peers, in the public sphere. It is in this sense that I argue that the Heideggerian hermeneutics should offer us not only a basis for reflecting on our collective practices, but also a theoretical framework for responsibly shaping our species’s future: a decision that should be made by all of us, not by scientists alone.

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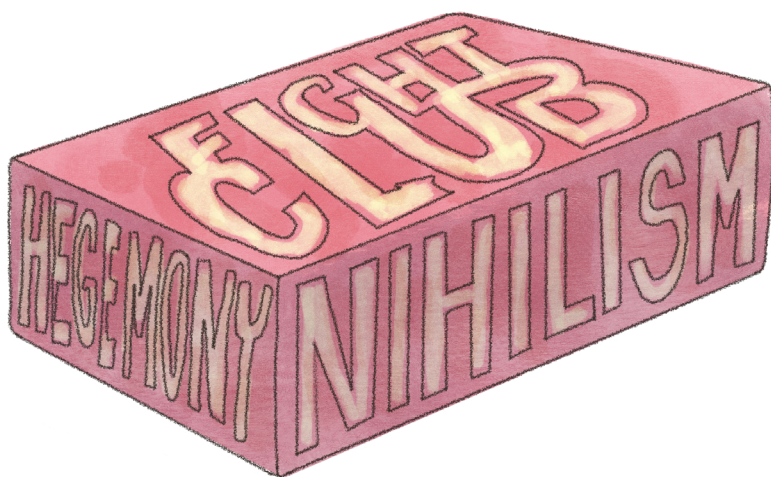
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SPLIJTSTOF



Self-Annihilation in David Fincher's *Fight Club*

Jacque Marliin

Abstract: In this paper, I wish to present a more pessimistic interpretation of *Fight Club* than what I found on offer in the literature I have surveyed thus far. I will begin with a brief overview of what I noticed are two common but distinct 'approaches' to interpreting the film: what I label on the one hand as uncritical "manosphere" interpretations of *Fight Club*, and on the other as critical interpretations of the film borrowing from gender theory. I fault both of these approaches for providing too optimistic an interpretation of the film. After making the case for a more pessimistic reading, I move on to discuss narcissistic pathologies and correlate manifestations of the death drive in relation to their portrayal in the film's events. My reading highlights two significant details: (a) that the acting out of the narrator is primarily masochistic and self-destructive; and (b) the relationship between this acting out on the one hand, and the overarching socio-economic and political milieu framed in the film on the other. Thereafter, my aim is to map out this constellation of details in terms of Nick Land's accelerationist thought, which identifies a cosmic death drive working *through* the subject *via* political-economy. In short, I argue that this pessimistic reading of *Fight Club* brings into relief the salience between Land's libidinal materialism and the processes of self-destruction depicted in the film, and conclude by claiming that *Fight Club* seeks not to deliver a lesson, but a warning.

1. A Brief Synopsis of *Fight Club* as is Relevant to my Paper

Fight Club (1999) chronicles the splendour and misery of our protagonist, a nameless narrator (played by Edward Norton), subjected to an alienating existence, working a meaningless and exhausting white collar job in late capitalist North America. A mere cog in the machine, our narrator finds meaning through the exercise of bachelor pad commodity fetishism and vapid, monotonous verbal tangos with the "single-serving friends" he makes on his regular business flights. He is seemingly unable to move past his debilitating insomnia until, by happenstance, he stumbles into a support group for men with testicular cancer. Captivated by the freedom to perform vulnerability and emasculation within the privacy of this close-knit circle, this quickly turns into a binge of support group barhopping, the illnesses for which the narrator can only pretend to have, and yet the sweet reward he reaps for attending them — a good night's sleep — is all but his. Alas, this victory proves to be short lived when Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter)

also begins attending these same support groups despite her also being in good physical health. Her unapologetic leaching off the misfortune of the ill exposes the narrator's lie for him, squabbling whatever therapeutic spoils he once sought for his own pacification.

Insomnia-riddled once again, our narrator can only find fleeting moments of temporary bliss in the vivid daydreams he has of himself at the mercy of horrific, mortifying air-traffic accidents — fantasies so violent that their very morbidity sublimates into a twisted but thoroughly cathartic gut sensation; some kind of disgusting spiritual cleansing, tailor-made for the suckers that fell victim to the neoliberal pipe dreams of utopian Wall Street successes.

At a moment's notice, our narrator snaps out of one of his hypnagogic, self-destructive wet dream, only to find himself talking to his new friend, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt). A figure with prophetic confidence, Tyler presents himself as a macho, anti-systemic, leader type figure. His speech always proverbial and vague — you could bet he was making it all up as he went along — yet every sentence he uttered latched onto some deeply felt cynical anger towards this system which betrayed and slighted his generation. His discontents were the discontents of all men surrounding him, and he would be damned if he was just going to sit and let society get away with it.

Before they know it, and without knowing why, the narrator and Tyler are getting into regular, consensual fist fights with each other. The release of pain is enthralling and cathartic. Soon enough, they're wrangling other bystanders in on the fun, and meeting up for weekly fight club appointments, a small but significant retreat from the conformity of a nine-to-five where more and more disenfranchised men can vent their frustrations by getting beaten to a pulp. Fight club's popularity and attendance soars, and rumour has it that there are other fight clubs forming of their own accord in neighbouring cities. Tyler seizes the opportunity to mobilise his recruits, giving them tasks beyond the remits of their make-shift boxing ring. These orders escalate quickly from small doses of disorder meant to throw the status quo off its balance, to full blown acts of organised terrorism working towards the complete demolition of consumerist society's sanctified pillars — banks and businesses. And thus, fight club goes from being a small pocket of cathartic resistance against a totalising society to Project Mayhem, a fully autonomous, all-pervasive network of nameless, faceless "space monkeys", all working in secret, all operating out in the open, all serving a common, higher cause. Project Mayhem, and its anarchic, anti-systemic ambitions, spreads its roots deep into the inner workings of every corner and aspect of society.

Of the narrator and Tyler, it must be noted that their comradeship is rich and bountiful from the moment they first laid hands on each other, yet as the film progresses, Tyler becomes increasingly more violent towards the narrator as the latter party grows ever more concerned about fight club's radicalisation. Be it by burning the narrator's hand with lye, or by driving the narrator full throttle into oncoming traffic, pain and physical violence are Tyler's ways of roping the narrator back onto his side.

Eventually however, the narrator becomes disillusioned with Project Mayhem, seeing in Tyler's grand scheme only a regressive, violent plan to harm innocents and bring society to a complete collapse. Towards the end of the film, the narrator is on a wild goose chase all around the United States to find Tyler, whose fight club-turned-terrorist organisation is on the verge of fulfilling its ultimate task: blow up all major credit-card company headquarters in America, with the sole goal of erasing all debt.

In a final showdown between the two protagonists, it is revealed to the narrator that Tyler was no one but his own projected alter-ego, and that all of Tyler's doings were in fact his own. In a last ditch attempt to bring Tyler's reign to an end once and for all, the narrator flips the script; he redirects his gun away from Tyler, into his own mouth and fires. This final suicidal gesture kills Tyler, but spares the narrator. The film ends with the explosives going off anyway, and we are treated to a vista documenting the complete annihilation and literal collapse of modern Western civilisation's most sacred institution; its economy.

2. Overview of Readings of *Fight Club*

a. Bainbridge and Yates on 'masculinity in crisis' movies

Fight Club, David Fincher's 1999 big-screen adaptation of the Chuck Palahniuk novel of the same name, can be situated in the wider context of a shift in the 1990's, with mainstream cinema tending towards new themes with regards to representations of masculinity (Bainbridge and Yates 2005, 300). In particular, this shift involved the emergence of a 'masculinity in crisis' motif — that is, the depiction and exploration of male trauma. This theme invited academic speculation about its role and meaning in relation to wider political and cultural shifts taking place at the same time. Thus I will proceed with a brief overview of the ways in which this theme has been discussed with regards to *Fight Club*.

One approach seeking to make sense of this trend posited that its comeuppance signalled a form of cultural resistance, one which harked back to 'traditional' forms of patriarchal masculinity (Bainbridge and Yates 2005, 300, 305-6). Narrowing our focus down to *Fight Club*, one such interpretation within these parameters suggests that consumer society has emasculated

men of their 'former' power, and that this potency may only be 'regained' through active resistance and assertion of this lost core (Guignon 2012). Indeed, interpretations of *Fight Club* of this sort are abundant amongst the manosphere and contemporary men's rights communities, and seem to come part and parcel with crude and primitive misinterpretations of Nietzsche (see Guignon 2012).¹

Yet Bainbridge and Yates (2005, 300-1) argue that films featuring this theme by no means *necessarily* serve to insist upon traditional forms of masculinity, nor do they fundamentally aim at contesting those tropes. Rather, it is argued that this motif itself offers spectators an opening whereby such forms of masculinity can be *either* reasserted *or* renegotiated. In their analysis of *Fight Club* for example, they argue that the film does not seek to portray reimagined masculinities, yet it does identify the cause and demand for such a toxic gender performance in the mechanisms of Western hegemony, and short-circuits the logic and morality of these injunctions when it is revealed that the narrator and Tyler Durden are one and the same person (Bainbridge and Yates 2005, 307). Accordingly, they argue that this reversal invites the spectator to "imagine the originary moment of trauma and thus to contemplate more radical alternatives" (Bainbridge and Yates 2005, 307).

b. Distinction between manosphere readings of *Fight Club* and gender theoretical approaches

Thus, we have on the one hand what I will term the "manosphere" interpretations of *Fight Club* — that is, *Fight Club* is a manual and we should follow the same path as the narrator if we want to emancipate ourselves — and on the other hand, we have what I will from hereon discuss as interpretations of the film from a gender theoretical perspective — that is, those arguing that the film opens a space whereby audience members can negotiate and renegotiate challenging concepts such as masculinity.

c. My claim that both approaches misleadingly aim to read an emancipatory edge in *Fight Club*, and that the film demands a more pessimistic reading

I argue that both interpretations of the film struggle to do the film justice on two accounts.

First, they are both constructing readings of the film in favour of some emancipatory edge. I will return to why I think this is inappropriate shortly.

¹ For a paradigmatic example of this online, see <https://web.archive.org/web/20250212001918/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpxHFNvUUmU>.

Secondly, whilst gender theoretical interpretations of *Fight Club* view the film as reaping some emancipatory reward, this is only so in terms of the affordance the movie offers towards audience members. In other words, *Fight Club*'s meaning exists only in terms of the film *qua* cultural artefact. And yet these understandings do not really meet the manosphere interpretations of *Fight Club* on their own terms: manosphere interpretations of *Fight Club* are not interested in what effect the film may have on its audience; on the contrary, it may even be argued that they are more directly engaged with the content of the film insofar as their reading takes aspects of the film's narrative arc at face value. Thus, I believe that a more appropriate response to these incorrect and dangerous paths taken when digesting *Fight Club* would be to present an alternative interpretation, one that stands to make better sense of the film's content.

In response to these interpretations, my claim is that *Fight Club* is a very bleak and pessimistic film. In my interpretation, I emphasise how the film acknowledges that critiques and movements aiming to undermine capitalism do not simply get subsumed by it, but actively end up reproducing it. Thus I do not think that the movie is trying to *tell* audience members anything, but is merely depicting something: a society gone awry, a feedback loop tending towards self-destruction, psychological dynamics, impulses, and drives that cannot help but hurtle along their predestined paths.

To support this claim, I will proceed by drawing upon psychoanalytical frameworks to tease out the internal logic driving this psycho-socio-political runaway train.

3. An Outline of Narcissistic Pathology and the Respective Death Drive Behaviours

a. Layton on the symptoms and aetiology of narcissism

Focusing on *Fight Club*'s narrator, the argument can be made that he presents a clear-cut case of a narcissistic pathology engendered by the surrounding socio-political conditions. I will present evidence in support of this claim by first outlining the remarkable overlap between characteristics common in narcissistic pathologies with those of *Fight Club*'s narrator, after which I will proceed by discussing the death drive in relation to narcissistic pathologies and the film accordingly.

To begin, however, I draw upon the work of Lynne Layton (2017, 92-6), wherein she explores the intersection of narcissism, capitalism, and their implications upon the film directly. First, she argues that symptoms accorded to this pathology include a splitting of the subject — demonstrated by the narrator's unconscious fabrication of his alter-ego, Tyler. Secondly, Layton addressed the gendered aspects of this pathology, suggesting that mascu-

line and feminine narcissistic pathologies construct and work towards particular ego-ideals. Thus, she claims that masculine narcissist pathologies (though not necessarily males with narcissistic personality disorder) idealise a purely independent and self-sustaining subject that devalues dependency on others, Tyler thus being the fictional manifest representation of this ego-ideal *par excellence*. Finally, whilst the aetiological factors for narcissistic pathologies are widely contested, Layton claims that they may no less result from a socio-political milieu that impinges upon autonomy, a hostile environment, as well as an upbringing that leaves the subject feeling unattended to and viewed as insignificant.² In this light, consider the oppressive, totalising system that denies the narrator pacification towards the beginning of the film. Thus it can be stated that the relationship between the narrator's narcissistic symptoms and the overarching political milieu is crucial.

b. Kernberg on the narcissistic death drive

Having established the narcissistic pathology exhibited by our narrator, it is necessary to zone in on the death drive as is manifest amongst narcissistic pathologies, so as to key in the vivid fantasies and enacting of violence in the film.

The death drive, broadly construed, is described by Kernberg (2007, 522-3; 2009, 1011-2) as a primarily unconscious impetus tending towards self-destruction. Amongst other symptoms, the death drive manifests in terms of sadistic and masochistic behaviour, as well as attempts to undermine clinical therapeutic intervention.

More specifically, it is noted that in patients with narcissistic pathologies, the death drive is a reaction to feelings of humiliation or defeat — here recall the narrator's shame in having his lie exposed by Marla Singer — and that it works towards some form of cathartic resolution to these sentiments by reestablishing the patient's superiority (Kernberg 2009, 1014-6). For example, actions aimed at disrupting therapy arise as a result of the patient's envy of the therapist's ability to offer assistance. Within this dynamic, the patient feels humiliated and inferior to someone well equipped to help them, and unconsciously sabotages any of the clinician's interventions so as to render the clinician less powerful. At the death drive's most extreme, Kernberg describes patients carrying out explicit acts of physical self-harm: consuming rat poison, self-mutilation, all the way up to and including

2 In all these examples, the environment is taken to include both a wider socio-political milieu, as well as the relationship dynamics obtained between the subject and their primary caregivers.

suicidal behaviour, wherein the patient seeks to reaffirm control over their own life by diminishing life's value in relation to that of the ego (Kernberg 2007, 519-20; 2009, 1014-6).

c. Diagnosing *Fight Club's* narrator and interpreting violence: narcissism, minus sadism, with an emphasis on masochism as self-destruction

Thus, I identify two central points: first, insofar as we accept that Tyler Durden is but a projection of the narrator's own self, then we must accept, to the contrary of what other scholars have argued, that the violence in the film between the narrator and Tyler must be *purely* masochistic, i.e. they are *necessarily* acts of cathartic self-harm and self-mutilation. Second, insofar as it has been argued that the narrator's narcissistic pathology was engendered by a totalising society that stripped him of all autonomy, the narrator's acting out bears the quality of a last resort — deprived of any further means for pacification, all that is left is the narrator and his fists. Here we see the oppressive mechanisms and tendencies of cultural, political, and economic processes working their way *through* the subject.

d. Emphasis on aspects which are omitted from most other *Fight Club* readings: that striving to annihilate a patrimonial emasculating system ends up reproducing a new one

And yet, what to make of the inauguration of the fight club meetings, and their rapid onslaught as homogenous and homogenising self-reproductive processes? Indeed, one detail that I found repeatedly omitted from readings of the film is the moment where the narrator and Tyler start to talk about fight clubs springing about in other states, ones they never actively instantiated themselves. Later on in the film, fight club becomes so pervasive that it operates smoothly and secretly within all aspects of society: membership of fight club swiftly goes from being exclusive to all-inclusive. Is this not precisely a depiction of the way ideology reproduces itself? Completely detached from the agency of a particular subject that supposedly single-handedly introduces people into this system, fight club becomes this self-reproductive network, a positive feedback loop. Corollary to this is the fact that, in his pursuit to destroy an oppressive, atomising political economic system that annihilates autonomy, the narrator ends up reproducing an even more totalising configuration.

The question remains as to how to bridge the gap between the narrator's subjective psychology and the wider political ambitions to dismantle capitalist hegemony. Or in other words, how to make sense of the oppressive forces working their way into the subject as self-destructive impulses, and back out into a complex network of autonomous, self-regulating rogue extremists? By

using Land's political-economic psychoanalysis, my answer will be to claim that this gap was never present to begin with. On the contrary, the narrator's acting out is nothing but a continuation of a wider overarching cosmic death drive, unleashed by politico-economic process, the technological advents and destructive tendencies of capital itself.

4. Nick Land on the Death Drive as Capital's Violent Closed Circuit

According to Lingis, and with respect to Land's thought, the death drive is nothing but the appropriation of inorganic excesses by living organisms. In other words, the death drive in living organisms seeks to utilise those annihilating forces lying dormant within dead matter against the organism itself, if only in some desperate attempt to make sense of the inevitability of death itself (Lingis 1995, 229). Yet for Land, "the natural individual cannot take hold of the catastrophic forces of the inhuman. The great advances of long-sustained collective, rational effort and enormously equipped technological enterprise" — that is, the very technological enterprise of late capitalism itself — "has unchained these forces and been able to channel them". Moreover, "The technological enterprise has been able to find nothing but the frail structure of life upon which to direct these catastrophic forces. By an occult pact with this collective rational effort the individual now finds the drive to overkill within himself" (Lingis 1995, 229). In this sense, the catastrophic forces of the death drive already precede life's advent, and it is only by virtue of our current political and economic configuration that these same catastrophic forces can be unleashed by the individual.

The end result of this configuration is Land's accelerationist underbelly. In his *Quick-and-Dirty Introduction to Accelerationism*, Land writes:

"there is no distinction to be made between the destruction of capitalism and its intensification. The auto-destruction of capitalism is what capitalism is" (Land 2017).

Elsewhere he writes:

"*The process* is not to be critiqued. The process is the critique, feeding back into itself, as it escalates. The only way forward is through, which means further in" (Land 2017).

In the context of *Fight Club*, this pivotally means that the cathartic death drive, which the narrator fantasises of and enacts upon himself, already pre-exists him. Indeed, it is not only engendered by the oppressive mecha-

nisms of political economy, but intensifies these oppressive mechanisms until their complete self-annihilation. In other words, the narrator's acting out is at once also a carrying out: in response to an ungratifying society, the emancipatory goals of undoing the injustices borne unto him by his surroundings do little more than reproduce and intensify those same mechanisms of totalisation. The self-destruction of the subject and the demolition of the overarching political-economic establishment depicted towards the end of *Fight Club* are thus not two distinct, unrelated events, but one and the same result of a singular overarching process.

5. Conclusion

As I have stated earlier in this paper, *Fight Club* has prompted viewers and cultural theorists alike to read some sort of message into the film, and the general reception is what I would here call optimistic. On the one hand, the manosphere has settled for a reading of the film as a manual to achieving emancipation from a supposedly emasculating society. Another popular interpretation amongst gender theorists is that the film offers viewers an opportunity to question and renegotiate the concept of masculinity. I find that both of these approaches fail to take seriously the cathartic portrayals of masochistic violence depicted in the film, and that this violence intensifies in the manner an indomitable positive feedback loop that ties the narrator to the wider political-economic configuration that set him off in this path in the first place. This is a far cry from the optimistic interpretations of *Fight Club* I am hinging my reading against. On the contrary, if my conclusion is to be sufficient, we should all take heed to one very serious warning from *Fight Club*: *do not work through fantasy. Do not let your fantasies work through you.*

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De bezwering van het kapitalisme en de toverspreuk van de ideologie

Mark den Dekker

Abstract: Magie is een vreemd concept. Het is niet volledig te vangen onder de term religie, noch die van wetenschap. Het bestaat in een schemerduister van dat wat juist niet onder deze andere termen geschaard kan worden. Ik beargumenteer dat de kapitalistische ideologie zich in datzelfde schemerduister bevindt. Kapitalistische ideologie is een kracht geworden die zo ver ons denkproces beïnvloedt dat het vaak *a priori* ligt aan onze redenatie. In de woorden van Žižek: ideologie is een vals bewustzijn van gedachten waarvan de ontologische status niet die van een gedachte is; het is hetgeen we weten zonder te weten dat we het weten (Žižek 1986, 16). Niet alleen spreekt het een bezwering uit over ons denkvermogen, het heeft ook onze realiteit in handen. Dit betekent dat kapitalistische ideologie niet enkel een laag vals bewustzijn over de echte realiteit is, maar dat er geen realiteit bestaat *an sich*. In dit essay heb ik het over wat de concepten van magie en kapitalistische ideologie inhouden, wat ze gemeen hebben, en waarom ik stel dat we kapitalistische ideologie moeten zien als magie om de kracht ervan te begrijpen.

Inleiding

De slogan van Coca-Cola is “Real Magic” (2023), en dat is precies wat het is. Als we om ons heen kijken lijkt het wel alsof iedereen betoverd is door de ideologie van het kapitalisme. Compleet irrationele gedachten worden realiteit door het onder de glimlach van een beroemdheid op een bushokje te zetten. Met als ultiem ideologisch idee dat het kapitalisme het eindstation van de geschiedenis is. In de woorden van Mark Fisher: “het is makkelijker je het einde van de wereld voor te stellen dan het einde van het kapitalisme” (Fisher 2009, 14). Als dat niet lijkt op pure betovering, weet ik het ook niet meer.

Is dit echter meer dan alleen een goede metafoor? Kan het zijn dat de kapitalistische ideologie niet enkel magisch is op een metaforische manier, maar dat we het moeten zien als daadwerkelijke tovenarij? Om hier achter te komen zullen we eerst kijken naar het concept MAGIE en wat het precies is, vervolgens naar het begrip van kapitalistische ideologie, om tot slot de vraag te stellen of dit begrip daadwerkelijk magisch is.

Dit is niet alleen een belangrijke analyse omdat het een kern-liggend element uit onze maatschappij en realiteit verder kan duiden en verklaren.

Ook is het belangrijk omdat als we ooit voorbij het kapitalisme willen komen, we ons bewust moeten zijn van de manieren waarop het kapitalisme zich verankert in onze wereld en in ons bewustzijn.

Wat is MAGIE?

Wanneer we het hebben over MAGIE is het niet vreemd dat onze gedachten meteen naar vuurbal-producerende tovenaars met puntmutsen en bezemstelen uit de wereld van Harry Potter of Dungeons and Dragons gaan. In onze maatschappij wordt MAGIE veelal gezien als iets dat alleen bestaat in sprookjesboeken en andere fictie werken en dus net zo echt is als draken, pratende dieren, en trickle-down economics.

Ik kan me voorstellen dat als we een analyse van het concept magie zouden maken aan de hand van de prototypetheorie dat het op zoiets uit zou komen.

De prototypetheorie van concepten stelt dat een concept een mentale representatie is van eigenschappen die objecten binnen een bepaald concept statistisch gezien neigen te hebben (Laurence & Margolis 1999, 28). Onder deze theorie is er dus geen strikte definitie, noch een set eigenschappen die een object moet bezitten om onder het concept te vallen, zoals het geval is bij de klassieke theorie (29). De prototypetheorie zou het concept MAGIE dus conceptualiseren door te kijken naar wat er in het algemeen als typisch magisch gezien wordt, om daarvan uit een lijst te maken met eigenschappen waaraan een object getoetst kan worden om te zien hoe typische MAGIE het is.

Hierin ligt echter het probleem van de prototypetheorie in relatie tot MAGIE; MAGIE zoals het in onze culturele *Zeitgeist* aanwezig is dermate anders dan MAGIE zoals de term in het verleden is gebruikt om bepaalde gebruiken en rituelen te duiden. We kunnen MAGIE als het ware als twee verschillende concepten in één zien; in de eerste plaats dat idee van de fictieve tovenarij, en in de tweede een algemene beschrijving van daadwerkelijk uitgevoerde rituelen en gebruiken die een onorthodoxe invloed op de werkelijkheid uitoefenen. Denk bij het tweede concept aan dingen als alchimie, tarotkaarten, en verscheidene inheemse gebruiken.

Belangrijk hier is dat het niet gaat of deze gebruiken ook daadwerkelijk ‘werken’ op een rationele manier; het relevante is de dichotomie tussen het puur fictieve en datgene waarvan gezegd kan worden dat het ‘bestaat’. Dit probleem is een vorm van wat Stephen Laurence en Eric Margolis het *Missing Prototypes Problem* noemen (38). Al is er een definitie van MAGIE te maken met de prototypetheorie, deze zal hoogstwaarschijnlijk berust zijn op een andere invulling van het concept MAGIE. We kunnen de prototypetheorie dus niet gebruiken om er achter te komen of iets zoals kapitalistische ideologie valt onder het concept MAGIE zoals gezegd kan worden daadwerkelijk bestaat.

Een andere mogelijke conceptualisatie van MAGIE is die zoals gegeven door Aleister Crowley, namelijk: "Magick is the science and Art of causing change to occur in conformity with Will." (Crowley 1929, 17) Ter illustratie gebruikt Crowley het voorbeeld dat schrijven iets magisch is:

It is my Will to inform the World of certain facts within my knowledge. I therefore take "magickal weapons", pen, ink, and paper; I write "incantations"---these sentences---in the "magickal language" ie, that which is understood by the people I wish to instruct; I call forth "spirits", such as printers, publishers, booksellers and so forth and constrain them to convey my message to those people. The composition and distribution of this book is thus an act of Magick by which I cause Changes to take place in conformity with my Will. (Crowley 1929, XVII)

Ingewijden in de taalfilosofie zullen hier wellicht een parallel zien met J.L. Austin's werk over wat hij *performative utterances* noemde. Een performative utterance is een statement dat een actie op zichzelf is; een zin waarmee de spreker, puur en alleen door het uit te spreken, op een bepaalde manier handelt. Austin gebruikt het voorbeeld van iemand die uitspreekt: "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow" (Austin 2008, 235). Deze zin, zo stelt Austin, is de actie op zichzelf; er is geen Kantian actie *an sich* die achter de zin schuilt en waar de uitspraak enkel rapport van uitbrengt.

Crowley's theorie is echter nog veel radicaler dan Austin, en stelt dat elke vorm van het uitoefenen van invloed op de realiteit een vorm van MAGIE is. De vraag dan is of dit een bruikbare definitie is voor ons onderzoek naar de positie van kapitalistische ideologie in relatie tot het concept MAGIE. Om dit te beantwoorden kwam ik uit bij het voorwoord van Slavoj Žižek's werk *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, waar ik later dieper op in zal gaan. In dit voorwoord stelt Žižek: "The multitude of a thing's actual properties is not simply reduced to the inner core of this thing's 'true reality'; what is more important is that the signifying reduction accentuates (profiles) the thing's inner potential." (Žižek 1989, xi) Wat dit voor ons nu betekent is dat het belangrijk is dat de conceptualisering van MAGIE ons iets vertelt over de verwachting die we hebben van het concept MAGIE. In andere woorden: stelt deze conceptualisering ons in staat om iets te zeggen over wat magie-eigen is? Deze vraag wordt eigenlijk al door Crowley zelf beantwoord, als hij in een voetnoot bij zijn definitie stelt: "In one sense Magick may be defined as the name given to Science by the vulgar." (Crowley 1929, 17). Het is voor onze doeleinden dus een non-definitie, en moeten we op zoek naar een andere conceptualisering.

De vraag is nu of we überhaupt verwachten dat MAGIE een concreet concept is zoals we dat verwachten bij concepten als RELIGIE of WETENSCHAP. Waar deze andere concepten iets zijn waarvan we kunnen verwachten dat ze enigszins tastbaar zijn in hun definitie, is MAGIE iets wat bijna inherent een mistige kwaliteit met zich meedraagt. Christopher Lehrich stelt dat we MAGIE niet kunnen analyseren zoals we dat met een traditioneel concept zouden doen. Dit omdat MAGIE tot een fundamenteel andere categorie behoort die een analyse op zijn eigen voorwaarden eist. “Magic”, zo stelt hij, “is properly speaking non- and anti-rational.” (Lehrich 2007, 177) Het speelt zich af buiten de lijntjes van de moderne concepties van rationaliteit en verwerpt de orthodoxe ideeën over oorzaak en gevolg. Lehrich stelt dat alhoewel het gebruikelijk is voor academici om MAGIE te zien als een soort religie (en in mindere mate een soort wetenschap), het juist dit ontastbare van MAGIE is dat een eigen categorie vergt. Aan de hand van een analyse van academische werken over magie concludeert Lehrich dat MAGIE juist een begrip is om hetgeen aan te duiden dat niet valt onder traditionele concepten:

In short, magic appears to be a way of labeling for future consideration that which has no reality to label, that which potentially violates reality. Magic then is not different because of its nature or its power; magic is considered powerful because first of all it differentiates. (164)

MAGIE is dus kort gezegd, dat wat we gebruiken om aan te tonen dat iets iets *anders* is. Iets wat buiten de grenzen van ons normale denken functioneert. MAGIE is wat niet is.

Wat is ideologie?

Het tweede deel van deze analyse betreft de vraag wat *ideologie* precies inhoudt. Het is belangrijk om meteen te duiden dat wanneer ik het hier over ideologie heb, ik specifiek en exclusief over de ideologie van het huidige kapitalistische systeem spreek. Ik maak dit onderscheid omdat de mechanismen van kapitalistische ideologie anders zijn dan andere mogelijke ideologieën en deze analyse dus niet universeel toepasbaar is.

Theorieën over kapitalistische ideologie zijn terug te leiden naar Karl Marx en zijn ideeën over wat hij “Warenfetisjisme” noemde. Het principe van Warenfetisjisme is dat producten onder kapitalisme een waarde krijgen die onafhankelijk is van de daadwerkelijke gebruikswaarde. Marx beschrijft hoe deze waarde, die hij *use-value* noemt, vervangen wordt door een waarde die enkel opgemaakt is door de economische mythe omtrent het product (Marx 1867, 46-55). Neem bijvoorbeeld het blikje Coca-Cola; de waarde van dit blikje is niet meer een optelsom van de grondstoffen en arbeid die nodig

zijn om het te produceren, noch de waarde die het geeft aan de consument om het te drinken. In plaats daarvan is de waarde van het blikje enkel te zien in relatie tot andere producten, de door Marx zo genoemde *exchange-value*. Het ideologische van dit alles is dat voor de consument dit alles is wat er is. Het blikje Coca-Cola wordt niet eens meer geproduceerd, het verschijnt op magische wijze in het frisdrankautomaat.

Slavoj Žižek borduurt verder op dit idee en stelt dat dit idee van Marx, wat in principe een puur economische analyse is, ook ingezet kan worden om verdere aspecten van onze samenleving te verklaren. Žižek beargumenteert dat de sociale realiteit die onze interacties met andere mensen en de wereld om ons heen verzorgt, gecreëerd is door ideologie.

MAGIE is dus kort gezegd, dat wat we gebruiken om aan te tonen dat iets iets anders is. Iets wat buiten de grenzen van ons normale denken functioneert. MAGIE is wat niet is.

Neem bijvoorbeeld de relatie tussen werknemer en baas, of hoe Žižek het formuleert, dat tussen een koning en zijn onderdanen: het koning-zijn is een product van de sociale relatie tussen een koning en zijn onderdanen, echter wordt deze relatie gevormd door zijn omgekeerde vorm: de onderdanen zien zichzelf als onderdanig aan de koning omdat deze op zichzelf gezien al koning is; alsof koning-zijn een inherente kwaliteit van die persoon is (Žižek 1986, 20). Als werknemer zien we onze baas dus als een autoriteitsfiguur *an sich*, maar daar ligt hem dus de ideologische schijnrealiteit; er bestaat geen *an sich* realiteit wat sociale relaties betreft.

Ideologie is voor Žižek geen bril die we af kunnen doen om de werkelijke realiteit te zien, omdat deze niet bestaat: “*Ideological' is not the 'false consciousness' of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by 'false consciousness'*” (16). Dit valse bewustzijn creëert een soort *as if* kwaliteit aan onze omgang met onze omgeving. Wanneer we geld gebruiken, zo zegt Žižek, weten we dat het een representatie van arbeid is, echter handelen we *as if* het waarde *an sich* heeft. Waar Marx ideologie conceptualiseerde met de zin “Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es.” (Marx 1867, 49), zegt Žižek: “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (Žižek 1986, 25). Ook al weten we dus dat de baas alleen onze baas is zolang we ons gedragen *as if* die dat is, kunnen we tevens niet uit deze schijnrealiteit stappen. Het hele idee van een *a priori*, *an sich* realiteit, eentje die bestaat buiten het subjectieve bewustzijn, is in zichzelf gezien voor Žižek het ultieme ideologische. Kapitalisme wordt aan ons verkocht als de *an sich* realiteit; iets dat gewoon ‘bestaat’.

Deze vorm van ideologie heeft ook gevolgen voor de manieren waarop er weerstand geboden kan worden tegen dit kapitalistische systeem. Zo stelt Mark Fisher dat dit voor een “kapitalistisch realisme” zorgt; een vals bewustzijn wat de mogelijkheid tot het ooit voorbijgaan van het kapitalisme onmogelijk doet klinken. “Vals bewustzijn” is een term die gebruikt wordt in de Marxistische filosofie om een staat van zijn aan te tonen waarin iemand niet doorheeft hoe de wereld daadwerkelijk functioneert. Het is hierin het tegenovergestelde van het klassenbewustzijn, het doorzien van de dominerende mechanismen van het kapitalisme. Met de bekende al eerder genoemde zin: “het is makkelijker je het einde van de wereld voor te stellen dan het einde van het kapitalisme” (Fisher 2009, 14) zet hij in één keer krachtig neer hoe het kapitalisme gezien wordt als een nog universele waarheid dan de wereld zelf. Het krachtige van de kapitalistische ideologie en de manier waarop het zich onderscheidt van andere ideologieën, aldus Fisher, is dat het als geen enkel andere ideologie in staat is om alle kritiek in zichzelf op te slokken en te gebruiken om het kapitalisme nog sterker te verankeren in ons bewustzijn. Hij duidt dit op de volgende manier:

Een morele kritiek op het kapitalisme, met de nadruk op de manieren waarop dit aanleiding geeft tot lijden, versterkt het kapitalistisch realisme alleen maar. Armoede, hongersnood en oorlog kunnen worden voorgesteld als een onvermijdelijk deel van de werkelijkheid, terwijl de hoop dat deze vormen van lijden zouden kunnen worden uitgebannen gemakkelijk kan worden afgeschilderd als naïef utopisme. (31)

De kritiek die door tegenstanders van het kapitalisme wordt geleverd wordt dus doordat de kapitalistische ideologie zich een monopolie op het ‘reële’ heeft toegeëigend enkel een manier voor mensen om nog meer in deze schijnrealiteit van het kapitalisme te geloven. Precies dat woord, ‘reëel,’ is in dezen zeer belangrijk: het heeft in zich de betekenis van ‘dat wat conform de realiteit is’. In die zin hebben liberalen gelijk als ze zeggen dat een wereld voorbij het kapitalisme niet ‘reëel’ is, omdat kapitalisme de realiteit zelf is.

Om het kort samen te vatten: kapitalistische ideologie is een vals bewustzijn van gedachten waarvan de ontologische status niet die van een gedachte is (Žižek 1986, 13); het is hetgeen we weten zonder te weten, wat de realiteit om ons heen niet alleen vormt, maar *is*.

Ideologie en het magische

Er zijn vele vergelijkingen te bedenken tussen ideologie en MAGIE. Neem bijvoorbeeld nogmaals Coca-Cola. Žižek beargumenteert dat Coca-Cola

het prototypische ideologische product is; het smaakt niet heel goed, heeft geen voedingsstoffen, maakt ons waarschijnlijk nog dorstiger dan dat we al waren, en de suiker- en cafeïne-vrije varianten missen zelfs het energiegevend element van frisdrank. Wat is dan de reden dat we het alsnog willen? Žižek zegt dat hetgeen we daadwerkelijk willen als we behoefte hebben aan een blikje Coca-Cola iets is wat verder gaat dan het object zelf; “something that is more in it than it” Dit “it”, hetgeen we werkelijk begeren, is niet iets wat we door chemische analyse van Coca-Cola zouden kunnen vinden, noch is het te doorgronden door het geheime recept te kraken. Het is een kwaliteit die door de marketing priesters van het kapitalisme wordt toegevoegd aan elk product om er voor te zorgen dat het vooral niet onze dorst lest. Hetgeen we echt willen, zo stelt Žižek, is dat we nog meer kunnen blijven willen. Een product wordt getransformeerd tot een symbool van de levensstijl van het kapitalisme; de levensstijl van consumptie. Door de doop van de marketing krijgt het kapitalisme meer in een blikje dan alleen frisdrank; er zitten dromen, hoop, en verlangen in vermengt. Het meest magische aan dit alles is dat zelfs als we weten dat het een illusie is, we het nog steeds geloven. Als het goochelaars waren geloofden we hun trucs niet, dus het moeten wel magiërs zijn.

De vergelijkingen die we kunnen maken zijn op zichzelf echter niet genoeg om te kunnen concluderen dat ideologie ook daadwerkelijk te scharen is onder het concept MAGIE. De vraag is natuurlijk waarom dit niet alleen een metafoor zou zijn, maar ook een daadwerkelijk goede conceptualisering van het begrip kapitalistische ideologie. Ik wil hier beargumenteren dat er drie hoofdzakelijke redenen zijn om dit aan te nemen.

Ten eerste is er te stellen dat kapitalistische ideologie, net als MAGIE, *is wat niet*. Net zoals dat magie een anti- en non-rationeel concept is, is kapitalistische ideologie dat op zekere hoogte ook. Ten eerste omdat het vele paradoxen en non-rationele ideeën creëert. Een voorbeeld hiervan is het zien van economische mechanismen als vraag en aanbod als de facto natuurwetten, waar in werkelijkheid het berust op bewuste keuzes van bedrijven. Ten tweede zouden we denken dat ideologie een verklaarbaar fenomeen is; echter mist dit het punt. Ik stel dat kapitalistische ideologie a priori ligt aan rationaliteit zelf. Zoals we hebben gezien is ideologie datgene wat onze conceptie van de wereld om ons heen vormgeeft en mogelijk maakt. Alle logica die we kunnen gebruiken om ideologie een plaats te geven in de rationele sfeer moet dus noodzakelijk door de lens van diezelfde ideologie bekeken worden. Omdat er geen realiteit *an sich* bestaat waaruit we kapitalistische ideologie op een objectieve manier kunnen bestuderen, blijft er een deel van ideologie altijd verborgen in het onderbewuste en niet-rationele.

Ten tweede kunnen we ideologie als iets MAGISCH zien omdat het een valse realiteit creëert. Onze wereld wordt gevormd door een macht die we niet zien maar toch alomtegenwoordig is. Een kracht die uitgaat van al onze handelingen en interacties met onze medemens zonder dat we er ons van bewust zijn omdat precies dat bewustzijn enkel plaats kan vinden bovenop een *a priori* onderbewustzijn, dat op zijn beurt gecreëerd wordt door deze ideologie. Er is in onze wereld niets dan kapitalistische ideologie. Dat wil zeggen; er bestaat geen “echte” werkelijkheid zonder deze ideologie.

Het derde en belangrijkste punt is dat deze valse realiteit niet doorbroken kan worden middels rationaliteit. Het letterlijk scharen van ideologie onder MAGIE is zo belangrijk omdat het ons een manier geeft om over ideologie te praten die het doelbewust en onherroepelijk buiten het rationele plaatst. Alleen door het zien van kapitalistische ideologie als iets wat ons letterlijk betovert kunnen we ons losmaken van de illusie dat we door deze ideologie heen nog een realiteit *an sich* kunnen zien. We moeten ons bewust zijn van de manier waarop kapitalistische ideologie ons onderbewustzijn eigen maakt en ons geen enkele ruimte toelaat tot het anders denken. Terugkomend op Žižek: hetgeen beweert niet ideologisch te zijn *is juist het ultieme ideologische*.

Conclusie

Wat MAGIE is kunnen we niet doorgronden door traditionele manieren van conceptualisering toe te passen. Het is een concept dat door zijn anti- en niet-rationele aard enkel gezien kan worden als een beschrijving voor datgene wat in het schemerduister van de verklaringen gebeurt. MAGIE is wat niet is. Kapitalistische ideologie bevindt zich in datzelfde schemer duister; deze kracht die onze realiteit creëert en alle aspecten van onze beleving omtovert tot het kapitalistische kan net zoals magie niet verklaard worden door religieuze noch wetenschappelijke analyse. Het toveren van een vals bewustzijn dat *a priori* aan onze werkelijkheid ligt geeft het kapitalisme zijn kracht. Het zorgt ervoor dat wij gevangen zitten onder een betovering waar we maar heel moeilijk uit kunnen ontwaken. We moeten kapitalistische ideologie dus wel als een magische bezwering zien, omdat we anders voor altijd vervloekt zijn om door een bril te kijken die niet bestaat naar een wereld die niet echt is.

Alles is gelul en als je daarvan bewust bent kan je je eigen gelul verzinnen, maar je moet het eerst accepteren dat het allemaal gelul is. - Abel van Gijlswijk, 2022

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