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The Real Internet

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At first glance, Slavoj Žižek's writings on 'cyberspace' from the late nineties don't hold up. The primary problem is the separation of 'cyberspace' or 'virtual reality' from the communicative exchanges part of everyday life in real existing capitalism. When Žižek wrote these pieces, computer-mediated interactions seemed to be on their way to constituting a new, separate reality that people might 'jack into' (William Gibson had already supplied a compelling term for this cybernetic space in his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*). Nineties theorists of technoculture, virtual reality, and cyberspace focused on the lawlessness of this new realm, particularly on the ways its anonymous, real time, textual interface facilitated identity play and sexual experimentation.[1] That 'cyberspace' was considered a separate domain let Žižek treat it not only as a world with its own dynamics but more fundamentally as a specific socio-cultural symptom. Thus, much as the neuroses of Freud's hysterics provided a point of access into the pathologies of bourgeois modernity, so did the psychotic character of virtual communities enable Žižek to begin theorizing the decline of symbolic efficiency constitutive of the 'postmodern constellation' (1999). My intent here is to reconsider Žižek's early account of 'cyberspace' in light of the

intensifications of communicative capitalism. What appear as glitches, I argue, open up the possibility of theorizing the internet as Real. Networked media's capture of subjects follows the circular movement of the drives.

1

Žižek populates his cyberspace essays with figures now stereotypic in press accounts of the internet. For example, in 'Quantum Physics with Lacan' (a chapter in *The Indivisible Remainder*, 1996), he invokes the adolescent whose compulsive computer play indexes a profound change in desire as such: a 'relationship to an "inhuman partner" is slowly emerging which is, in an uncanny way, more fulfilling than the relationship to a sexual partner' (1996: 193). Žižek also emphasizes identity play in virtual communities, positioning such experimentation as perhaps the most fascinating aspect of networked communications. On line, I can be anybody. And I can change who I am at any time. Žižek extends these ideas in 'Cyberspace, or the Unbearable Closure of Being,' published the following year (in *Plague of Fantasies*). Reiterating the problem of knowledge presented by computer-mediated interaction—is the other before me on the screen real or a program? Is the identity the other presents true or does it enact a kind of fantasy?—Žižek focuses this essay on the dissolution of three key boundaries of separation, those between the natural and the artificial, reality and its appearance, and the self and its others (1997: 134).

Even if one agrees with Žižek's account of the way 'cyberspace' brought to the fore a set of ambiguities that have always troubled the subject, the moment when these questions are the most pressing ones has clearly passed. The name of that passing is Web 2.0. Despite its over-determination as a term trying too hard to renew the enthusiasm of the dotcom years by grouping together blogs, social network sites, photo-sharing, video-sharing, remixes, mash-ups, and other activities of users not just generating content but making and distributing new applications, Web 2.0 designates nonetheless the surprising truth of computer-mediated interactions: the return of the human.[2] Differently put, the matter of the Internet has less to do with bits, screens, code, protocol, and fiber-optic cables than it does with people.[3]

Precisely insofar as Web 2.0 marks the return of humans to networked information and communication technology, Žižek's work—inclusive of the early discussions of 'cyberspace'—remains indispensible to critical theories of new media. As I demonstrate in *Publicity's Secret* (2002), his Lacanian-Marxist version of ideology critique helps clarify the way networked communications materialize a particular version of publicity construed in terms of the debating public presupposed by ideals of participatory democracy. I refer to this formation as

communicative capitalism. Žižek's discussions of fantasy, fetishism, and the decline of symbolic efficiency are crucial components of my account.

The latter concept is particularly vital to critical media theory insofar as it designates the fundamental uncertainty accompanying the impossibility of totalization.[4] The contemporary setting of electronically mediated subjectivity is one of infinite doubt, ultimate reflexivization. There is always another option, link, opinion, nuance or contingency that we haven't taken into account, some particular experience of some other who could be potentially damaged or disenfranchised, a better deal, perhaps even a cure. Isn't the very way we are posing our questions already a problem? What about the suppositions and closures already informing our thought, our language, our grammar? The very conditions of possibility for adequation (for determining the criteria by which to assess whether a decision or answer is, if not good, then at least adequate) have been foreclosed. Žižek uses Lacan to express the point as a decline of the Master and the suspension of the classical function of the Master signifier: there is no longer a Master signifier that stabilizes meaning, that knits together the chain of signifiers and hinders their tendencies to float off into indeterminacy (Žižek 1997: 150-153).[5] Whereas the absence of such a Master might seem to produce a situation of complete openness and freedom—no authority is telling the subject what to do, what to desire, how to structure its choices—Žižek argues that in fact the result is unbearable, suffocating closure (1997: 153)[6] Without criteria for choosing, one loses the sense that one need bother choosing at all.

Although Žižek develops his discussion of the decline of symbolic efficiency in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), extending it from virtual communities into late capitalism more generally, the idea emerges in the early essays on cyberspace. In both of the aforementioned pieces, Žižek emphasizes the virtuality of the symbolic. This emphasis distinguishes Žižek's discussion of cyberspace from other ones circulating in nineties media theory. The functioning of the Master Signifier depends on virtuality. It works not as just another element in a chain, but as something that is more than itself, something present as potential. Žižek draws an example from Freud: the threat of castration has itself castrating effects (1997: 150). Cyberspace threatens *this* virtuality. The paradox: cyberspace is not virtual enough.

Žižek considers several ways computer-mediated interaction threatens virtuality. One is the loss of the binding power or performative efficacy of words. Words are no longer 'subjectivized' insofar as they fail to induce the subject to stand by them.[7] At any moment, the visitor to cyberspace can simply 'unhook' himself (1996: 196). Since exit is an option with nearly no costs, subjects lose incentives for their words to be their bonds. A second, more fundamental, threat involves the dissolution of the boundary between fantasy and reality, a

dissolution affecting identity and desire. Insofar as digital environments enable the realization of fantasies on the textual screen, they close the gaps between the subject's symbolic identity and its phantasmic background (1997: 163). Instant gratification fills in the lack constitutive of desire. Hyper-textual play enables the unstated subtext of any text to be brought to the fore, thereby eliminating the textual effects of the unsaid. Put somewhat differently, fantasies that are completely realized cease to be fantasies.[8] A repercussion of this filling-in is a third threat, a threat to meaning. The gap of signification, the minimal difference that makes some item or answer significant, that makes it 'feel right or 'the one' dissipates. But instead of eliminating the space of doubt, the filling-in occasions the loss of the possibility of certainty. Žižek asks, 'Is not one of the possible reactions to the excessive filling-in of the voids in cyberspace therefore *informational anorexia*, the desperate refusal to accept information, in so far as it occludes the presence of the Real?' (1997: 155). The feast of information results in a more fundamental starvation as one loses the sense of an underlying Real.

All three threats—to performativity, desire, and meaning—indicate cyberspace's foreclosure of the symbolic (the elimination of the space of the signifier as it slides into the Real which thereby itself loses the capacity to appear as Real). Žižek treats this foreclosure of the symbolic in the terms of paranoid psychosis: the Other is both missing and fully, overwhelmingly, present (1996: 196). Yet, he doesn't presume the subject's absorption in the imaginary *jouissance* of a pre-Oedipal primal oneness. Žižek is careful to note that such an image of friction-free immersion is 'cyberspace capitalism's' own ideological fantasy, a fantasy of a society without antagonism. What's at stake, then, is post-Oedipal, an order that doesn't rely on a Master Signifier holding together the chain of significations (1996: 196). In this order, the Real presence of the Other is lost as the lack in the Other is filled in. The something extra, the inexpressible mystery or *objet a* that makes the Other Real is subsumed by one who is '*over-present*, bombarding me with the torrential flow of images and explicit statements of her (or his) most secret fantasies' (1997: 156). Thus, correlative to the absence of the Real Other are the unbearable intrusions of the other's *jouissance*.

My reading of Žižek's account of the loss of the Real of the Other, over-proximity, and paranoia corrects some of the errors in Wendy Chun's treatment of paranoia in *Control and Freedom* (2006). Missing the way that the function of the signifier is always virtual, she asks whether 'being a father' can 'stand as a primordial signifier now that fatherhood can be scientifically determined' (271). The problem here is twofold. First, the symbolic function of the paternal signifier had nothing to do with the 'being' of a father. There was always a necessary gap between being and signification ('standing'). Lacan explains in Seminar XVII: 'The real

father is nothing other than an effect of language and has no other real . . . the notion of the real father is scientifically unsustainable' (2007: 127). Second, that the function of the paternal signifier is in decline, that it has changed fundamentally as a result of universalized reflexivity is precisely Žižek's point (1999: 342-347). Additionally, insofar as she neglects communicative capitalism's impact on the very possibility of shared meaning, Chun mistakenly presents paranoia in terms of 'inadequate information' (267) and 'technologies' vulnerabilities' (268). In connection with her assertion that the problem of paranoia involves ignoring 'the difference between possibility and probability' (259), these remarks obfuscate what's at stake in the decline of symbolic efficiency, namely, the conditions of possibility of adequation and credibility. No amount of information, technology, or surveillance will compensate for the change in the symbolic. In the terms of the early Lacan to whose analyses of psychosis Chun refers, the foreclosure of the paternal signifier means that there is nothing that can hold together the chain of significations (although there are possibilities for momentary stabilizations of meaning/significance effected through *objet a*). The change in the symbolic is Real.[9] For the subject, the consequence of this absence of symbolic mediation of the imaginary and the Real is suffocating closure before the intrusions of the unbearable *jouissance* of the other. Consequently, Chun's appeal to a notion of freedom as vulnerability remains trapped in the terms she endeavors to critique: the vulnerable subject threatened by the *jouissance* of the other is strictly correlative to the decline of the symbolic and the absence (and resulting over-proximity) of the other qua Real (2006: 30, 297).

To return to Žižek: the central insight of his early work on cyberspace involves the change to the symbolic. Žižek argues that the gaps in the symbolic (the gaps that enable access to the Real insofar as the Real cannot be approached directly) are filled in (saturating 'the virtual space of symbolic fiction,' 1996: 190). The result is a situation of non-desire, non-meaning, and the unbearable intrusion of enjoyment.

2

Friedrich Kittler begins *Gramophone, Film, Typerwriter* with 'optical fiber networks' in order to get to an end: 'Before the end, something is coming to an end' (1999: 1). The end is an end of differentiation, more specifically, the differentiation between image, text, and voice. Digitization brings it about: 'Instead of wiring people and technologies, absolute knowledge will be an endless loop' (1999: 2). Kittler treats the distinctions between image, text, and voice in terms of the Lacanian registers of the imaginary, Symbolic, and Real (1999: 15). Lacan's registers, he tells us, are in fact an historical effect of changes in storage technologies. The imaginary

consists in the cuts and illusions that comprise fantasies of wholeness, be they before the mirror or on the screen. The Symbolic is typing, the machinic word in all its technicity. The Real is recorded sound, inclusive of the hisses and noise accompanying the vocals produced by a larynx. Digitization erases the distinctions between visual, written, and acoustic media. It turns all data into numbers that can be stored, transmitted, copied, computed, and rearranged. Taking the place of the material differences providing the basic structure of Lacanian psychoanalysis is the feedback loop. Kittler writes, 'A simple feedback loop—and information machines bypass humans, their so-called inventors. Computers themselves become subjects' (1999: 258).

Leaving to the side—for now—the loops and knots characteristic of Lacan's later work on drive and the Real, I want to note an initial correspondence between Žižek and Kittler. Even as Žižek emphasizes cyberspace and Kittler digitization (as well as algorithms, hardware, and fiber optic cables), of concern to each is a change in the status of the word, of the function of the symbolic and its separation from the imaginary and the Real.[10] Each emphasizes the radically totalizing effects of information technologies: *all* information will be digitized; *all* knowledge will circulate in optical fiber networks; 'the whole of reality will be "digitalized"' (1997: 164).Yet, whereas Kittler evokes the end of 'so-called man' as humanity is disintegrated and reconfigured in the codes and computations of machinic circuits, Žižek argues that some dimension of humans-in-bodies persists as a 'remainder of the real' that resists virtualization (1996: 197). That is to say, rather than construing digitization in terms of 'its capacity to inscribe the real entirely independently of any interface with the human,' Žižek suggests instead a transcription or 'redoubling' of reality in the 'big Other' of cyberspace (1997: 164).[11] This redoubling will necessarily remained tied to human embodiment. Or, differently put, not only does the Real exceed its inscriptions but this excess cannot be uncoupled from human experience and persistence: its most fundamental dimensions remain inhuman and unconscious.

3

Mark Hansen's *New Philosophy for New Media* endeavors to rescue human being from Kittler's radical anti-humanism. Hansen approaches the problem via embodiment, more specifically, via a notion of affectivity he develops by retrieving Bergson from his appropriation by Deleuze. Important for my discussion here is less Hansen's critique of Deleuze than his use of Deleuze against Kittler. Hansen's argument focuses on the image. He writes: 'Kittler's concept of digital convergence yields a theory of the *obsolescence of the image*—a radical suspension of the image's (traditional) function to interface the real (information) with the human sensory apparatus' (2004: 71). As digitization turns all media into numbers, it changes their hold on the

reality of the empirical world. Technical images, images comprised of numbers, can be altered all the way down; there is no longer a persisting materiality that links the image to its ostensible source. The digital image is just a 'virtual block of information' (73). Hansen points out that the very term 'digital image' is oxymoronic insofar as it reaffirms the divisions between optics, acoustics, and writing that the digital ostensibly undercuts (78), divisions that are connected to embodied sensory persons. In contrast to Kittler, Deleuze analyzes digitization as a modification of the time-image that institutes a new mode of framing. Hansen explains, 'specifically, it resituates the source of the virtual from the interstices between (series of) images to interstices *within* the image itself. In a sense, it *incorporates* the virtual within the actual' (2004: 75). Technical flexibility does not eliminate the aesthetic challenge of framing the virtual, a challenge that Hansen reads as pointing to human experience rather than remaining trapped in fiber-optic cables.

Even as Hansen's discussion of the image installs some healthy indeterminacy into Kittler's techno-determinism, there are two problems with his endeavor to rehumanize the digital with an appeal to the body. The first concerns the link between information and meaning. The second concerns the distinction between the eye and the gaze. In his critique, Hansen charges Kittler with radicalizing Claude Shannon's separation of meaning from information (2004: 77). As an alternative, Hansen offers Donald McKay's account wherein information 'is necessarily correlated with meaning' (79). McKay's supplement to Shannon accentuates the role of the receiver of information. The receiver is part of the context determining what information is selected in a given situation. Not surprisingly, Hansen highlights embodiment as it affects the way the receiver frames or selects information. But his criticisms miss their target: he doesn't say why the receiver would be a human rather than a machine (not to mention multiple machines). Machine language doesn't depend on meaning; signals aren't necessarily signifiers.

Additionally, Hansen's attempt to anchor meaning in embodiment leads him to understate the impact of the eclipse of meaning in the decline of symbolic efficiency. He proceeds as if individual embodied experiences could overcome structural undecideability.[12] *Contra* Hansen, a symbol is not primarily an element of an individual receiver's internal activity of generating symbolic structures (2004: 78). Symbolization as such is intersubjective, given to and impressed upon the subject in and through language. Patterns of information come from without; they configure human embodiment rather than emerge 'embryogenetically.'[13] Counterintuitively, Hansen's embodied account of meaning is almost more effective at uncoupling communication from information than Kittler's cybernetic machines: an outgrowth of internal processes of an

organism, ‘meaning’ is originally non-communicable, specific to the embodied experience of the individual receiver.

In focusing on the receiver, Hansen relies on a model of communication in terms of sender-message-response. Under communicative capitalism, however, this model fails to account for the vast majority of communicative utterances (Dean 2009). Uncoupled from contexts of action and application—as on the internet or in print and broadcast media—the message is part of a circulating data stream. To this extent, it is better understood as a contribution rather than a message at all. Its particular content doesn’t matter—*did I forward a photo of kitten or news of a scandal*? Who sends it doesn’t matter. *Did I link to a blog post or did a crawler find it and dump it on a splog*? And, who receives a contribution doesn’t matter—*the thirty-six of my Facebook friends who happened to check their newsfeeds within an hour of my update? The thousands who happen upon a particular video on YouTube?* What matters in this setting is circulation, the addition to the pool. Any particular contribution remains secondary to the fact of circulation. I should add that the value of any particular contribution is likewise inversely proportionate to the openness, inclusiveness, or extent of a circulating data stream: the more opinions or comments that are out there, the less of an impact any given one will make. Hansen’s turn to the receiver occludes this contemporary media ecology wherein the use value of a message, and hence its reception by an individual receiver, is less important than its exchange value, its circulation within a larger flow of contributions. A contribution need not be understood; it need only be repeated, reproduced, forwarded, archived. Circulation—Kittler’s endless loop—is the setting for the acceptance or rejection of a contribution.

I turn now to the second set of problems in Hansen’s *New Philosophy for New Media*, problems centering on the distinction between the eye and the gaze. His two gestures to anamorphosis enable me to frame my discussion. As is well known, in Seminar XI Lacan talks about anamorphosis in Hans Holbein’s famous painting, *The Ambassadors* (Lacan 1981). Recall, a strange oval is in the foreground of the painting, in front of the two ambassadors. I can imagine ufologists arguing that the image is clearly a saucer and thus one more bit of evidence for the reality of the alien presence. Although Lacan notes that from some angles the object appears to be ‘flying through the air,’ he doesn’t pursue the saucer angle. He does, however, focus on a kind of alien presence in the painting, the disruptive impact of the spectator on the field of vision (1981: 88). Viewed straight on, the oval is a stain, a distortion. A shift in the viewer’s perspective reveals a skull, a symbol of death, of the transience of the world of things and the life of men. Confronting the painting directly, the spectator sees an oblique object beyond his comprehension. Yet, as he moves past the painting, he glimpses something else, the

skull, and in this glimpsing confronts what his own vision hid from him as well as the fact that it was his vision that was doing the hiding. For Lacan, then, anamorphosis indicates the distortion in the field of vision. He refers to this distortion as the gaze, that is, the impossible object of the scopic drive. As Joan Copjec cogently remarks, 'the relevance of [Lacan's] lengthy discussion of anamorphosis is to focus on the *impurity* of the painting's visual field, which consists not only of *what the spectator sees*, but also of a gaze and a vanishing point, which is nothing other than *that which the spectator contributes to what she sees*' (Copjec 2002: 184). The visual field is more than an empirical given in that the spectator adds a perspective to it. This addition, moreover, is always at least minimally disruptive and uncanny. One way Lacan expresses the idea of the gaze: *I see myself seeing myself* (1981: 180).

In what he presents as a radicalization of anamorphosis, Hansen provides a gripping discussion of a crucial scene in Ridley Scott's 1982 film, *Blade Runner*. The scene features the Esper machine, a contraption that moves and sounds almost like a ventilator and functions as a kind of photographic enlarger and printer. Rick Deckerd (Harrison Ford) vocally instructs the machine to zoom and pan so as to bring out a detail deeply hidden in the image. Yet, as Hansen emphasizes, the perspective of this machine is impossible. An enlarged photograph could never produce the hidden detail; the detail is an impossible object (*objet petit a*) that must be from elsewhere, from some deep three dimensional dataspace the very impossibility of which makes it more Real than the two dimensional photographic image ever could be.

To be sure, this is not quite how Hansen puts it. Rather, he writes: 'With this deterritorialization of reference, we reach the scenario presented in the scene from *Blade Runner*—the moment when a computer can "see" in a way profoundly liberated from the optical, perspectival, and temporal conditions of human vision' (2004: 95). For Hansen, the computer's liberation from the optical renders its dataspace an anamorphic distortion far more radical than the oblique stain in *The Ambassadors*. The stain in *The Ambassadors* is 'resolved from the standpoint of another *single* perspective.' In contrast, *Blade Runner* confronts us with 'a multiply distorted technical mediation that requires the abandoning of *any particular perspectival anchoring* for its resolution' (2004: 96). The vision of the machine dissolves human vision's connection to the world. Because his project is building a theory of embodied perception, Hansen has to grapple with this cut between machinic and human perception. The remainder of the chapter in which the gesture to *Blade Runner* occurs takes up this task.

Hansen could have avoided the initial severing of human from machinic vision had he considered the gaze. The 'impossibility' of the film's photographic machine isn't specific to the machine. Rather, it is an irreducible element of the gaze, the fact that the inclusion of the

spectator in the visual field ruptures the field. Hansen, however, construes vision in terms of 'optical, perspectival, and temporal conditions' instead of allowing for the gaze beyond appearance (Lacan 1981: 103). In effect, the very embodied subject Hansen wishes to defend is missing from its own picture! Put somewhat differently, the gaze as the object of scopic drive is a point of irresolution, not an error of perspective or visual mistake. To treat it as such a mistake is to affirm an empirical given as if were complete rather than disrupted by the Real.

Hansen's second discussion of anamorphosis also involves skulls, namely, a 2000 sculptural installation by Robert Lazzarini conveniently entitled *skulls* and exhibited at the Whitney's 'Bitstreams' show. Hansen tries to reproduce the experience of the work for his readers:

> At each effort to align your point of view with the perspective of one of these weird sculptural objects, you experience a gradually mounting feeling of incredible strangeness. It is as though these skulls refuse to return your gaze, or better, as though they existed in a space without any connection to the space you are inhabiting, a space from which they simply cannot look back at you. And yet they *are* looking at you, just as surely as *you* are looking at *them*! (2004: 199-199)

Although other commentators on *skulls* have emphasized anamorphosis and the work's evocation of *The Ambassadors*, Hansen argues that anamorphosis is in fact not at stake in the work at all. Why? Because the skulls 'do not resolve into a normal image when viewed from an oblique angle, but confront the viewer with the projection of a warped space . . .' (2004: 200). For Hansen, what makes visual space 'normal' for the human spectator is resolution, the correction of perspectival distortion (2004: 202). As my discussion of Lacan indicates, however, the notion of the gaze reminds us that 'what one looks at is what cannot be seen' (1981: 182). The object of the gaze is *objet a*, the impossible object anchoring and disrupting the subject. Lazzarini's *skulls* thus exemplifies the 'strange contingency' of the gaze, its traumatic impact on the subject who feels itself being seen. Lacan explains: 'The world is all-seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic—it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too' (1981: 75). Hansen evokes this strangeness, associating it with the gaze even as he resists this insight in pursuit of his account of embodied perception.

Hansen's critique of Kittler pushes him to consider the virtual within the image, that is, within the visual field. For him, this virtuality provokes a confrontation because the spectator's perspective is 'normally' resolved. A proper theory of affectivity, he suggests, can help make sense of how embodied humans live with new media. For Hansen, the return of the human is the return of embodiment, as well as of a certain aesthetic relation to the sensorium. In contrast,

I've argued that the visual field of the subject is necessarily ruptured by the gaze. The gaze marks a gap of irreducible irresolution, of the subject's presence in what it sees. This introduction of the gaze, moreover, clicks on the impossible kernel of the Real, of the inhuman object of scopic drive, inseparable from the human and hence inseparable from the human's return.

4

Although Hansen omits the gaze from his account, my discussion thus far suggests its unavoidability, its persistence as a stain in the visual field, a stain that distorts even as it supports our embodied seeing. The gaze also disrupts the other aspect of Hansen's argument I mentioned, his attempt to reconnect information and meaning. A return to the idea of the decline of symbolic efficiency helps clarify this point. In a first instance, one might be tempted to think of the gaze as that of an Other 'who registers my acts in the symbolic network' (Žižek in Bulter, Laclau, Žižek 2000: 117). Such an Other provides the subject with an ego ideal, a point of symbolic identification. The gaze qua ego ideal is the point from which one sees one's actions as valuable and worthwhile, as making sense. Žižek argues that this gaze is a crucial supposition for the subject's capacity to act; hence, the decline of symbolic efficiency is necessarily accompanied by the breakdown in capacities for action. Absent the gaze of an ego ideal, one may feel trapped, passive, or unsure as to the point of doing anything at all. To this extent, identifying with this gaze enables the subject's activity.

Such a gaze structures our relations to our practices. For example, instead of experiencing the state as myriad forms and organizations, branches and edicts, presences and regulations, in our daily activities we may assume that the state is a singular entity, a big Brother watching what we are doing. Similarly, we may presuppose an enemy assessing our every action—a devious colleague? Envious neighbor? Jealous lover? Or we may imagine how we would appear in the eyes of someone we admire—the priest who would find us saintly, the professor who would admire our brilliance, the poor unfortunates who would hail us for our heroism. The point is that through symbolic identification the subject posits the very entity to which it understands itself as responding. How it imagines this other will be crucial to the kinds of activities the subject can undertake.

Weirdly, then, the active subject has to posit a kind of passivity, that is, a passive Other before whom it appears. The subject has to imagine itself, in other words, as fascinating this Other, as doing something or saying something or even watching something that captivates it. As Žižek emphasizes, the gaze is thus reflexive, doubled in so far as the subject sees itself

being seen. The one who is captivated already is the subject. Although the subject needs to posit a gaze in order to understand its acts as registering, there is something disturbing about the gaze, something foreign and excessive, unchosen and unwanted. Žižek writes that 'in the case of the gaze, the point to which the subject makes himself seen retains its traumatic heterogeneity and nontransparency, it remains an object in a strict Lacanian sense, not a symbolic feature' (1993: 197). In a setting of multiply interlinked media, say, we are never quite certain to what we have made ourselves visible. We don't know who is looking at us or how they are looking. We can't even be sure whether there is a single or multiple perspectives. Who is lurking on my blog? What databases am I in? Who has googled me and why? The lure of the internet is not simply the paranoid's desire for a big Other behind the scenes. Rather, it resides in the gaps, holes, and uncertainties around which we circulate.

This disturbing uncertainty thus points to the second, more traumatic version of the gaze, the gaze not as the big Other of the ego ideal but as the object of the drive. In this version, the gaze refers to the subject's entrapment in the field of the visible: 'I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides' (Lacan 1981: 72). What one sees is always incomplete, in need of being-filled in. Yet, this filling-in necessarily brings with it inadequacies and distortions. The subject might insert what it wants to see; its desire may fill in the gaps it encounters. It may then become aware of such a gap, and its involvement in it, feeling itself somehow seen, even vulnerable. Each side of this relation to the gap (to a lure or stain in the visible field)—the side of seeing it and of being seen seeing it—is an aspect of the gaze. Copjec's reading of Freud is one of the best accounts of this gaze as the object of scopic drive. Freud's argument, she explains,

> distinguishes the act of looking at oneself through the intermediary of an *alien object* from the act of looking at oneself through an *alien person*. The first concerns that reflexive circuit by which one apprehends oneself in the categories of the culture to which one belongs or of someone one wishes to please, with the result that one thereby regards oneself as a known or knowable object. The second concerns a completely different kind of circuit, that of the active-passive drive, which turns around on itself. In this case, because I do not expose myself to the look of a determinate other, I do not receive a message back regarding my determinate identity. The reflexive circuit of scopic drive does not produce a *knowable object*; it produces a *transgression of the pleasure principle*, by forcing a hole in it. The scopic drive produces an exorbitant pleasure that disrupts the ego identity formed by the first circuit (2002: 213-214).

I once thought I saw the postman sitting in his delivery truck cuddling a puppy. This seemed strange. A second glance revealed that he was sorting letters and that there was no puppy. I

immediately felt oddly embarrassed, even rather ashamed. It was almost as if there were a gaze in the postman-(missing) puppy complex that saw me see myself making this bizarre mistake. It felt like I was caught not just making the mistake but realizing, becoming aware of, the mistake. In Lacan's words, 'Generally speaking, the relation between the gaze and what one wishes to see involves a lure. The subject is not presented as other than he is, and what one shows him is not what he wishes to see' (1981: 104). The gaze of scopic drive, then, refers not to a specific person whom one imagines being seen by but rather to a more unsettling feeling of an excess disturbing one's seeing, both in terms of what one sees and in one's being seen.

In communicative capitalism, the gaze to which one makes oneself visible is a point hidden in an opaque and heterogeneous network. It is not the gaze of the symbolic other of our ego ideal but the more disturbing, traumatic gaze of a gap or excess, *objet petit a*. Our disclosures are surveilled, archived, remembered, in ways that exceed our ability to manage or control. On the one hand, this is the source of their immense attraction, what lures us in, what incites us to practices of revelation and display. On the other, the media practices that invite us to create and express, to offer our thoughts, feelings, and opinions *freely*, to participate (but in what?), deliver us up to the use and enjoyment of others.

Because one is never sure how one is seen, one is never certain of one's place in the symbolic order. How, exactly, are we being looked at? One never really knows who one is—despite all the cameras, files, media, and databases. Facebook tries to help us out with this by supplying endless quizzes that promise to tell us who we really are—which *Lord of the* Rings character, which famous philosopher, which month. It's almost as if Facebook is trying to let us see ourselves as alien objects again or like we return, again and again, to Facebook as a way of avoiding alien persons. But we can't—not really. We already know that a celebrity gamer in one place is elsewhere just another kid. A famous jazz musician may have zero name recognition among economists. Someone with a million friends on MySpace may be no one at all to the rest of us. Who one is in the sociosymbolic order is uncertain—and ever changing. The order is never fixed; it is in constant flux. The term for this flux and uncertainty is the decline in symbolic efficiency.

5

To emphasize the decline of symbolic efficiency is to emphasize a retreat or effacement in the law of desire and an amplification of the logic of drive. Desire and drive each designate a way that the subject relates to enjoyment. Desire is always a desire to desire, a desire that can never be filled, a desire for a *jouissance* that can never be attained. In contrast, drive attains

jouissance in the repetitive process of not reaching it. Failure (or the thwarting of the aim) provides its own sort of success. Desire is like the path of an arrow; drive is like the course of the boomerang. What is fundamental at the level of the drive, Lacan teaches, is 'the movement outwards and back in which it is structured' (1981: 177). Through this repetitive movement outward and back the subject can miss his object but still achieve his aim; the subject can 'find satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly missing its object' (Žižek 1999: 297). Because failure produces enjoyment, because the subject enjoys via repetition, drive captures the subject. Žižek writes, 'drive is something in which the subject is caught, a kind of acephalous force which persists in its repetitive movement' (1999: 297).

Žižek explains the difference between desire and drive via a change in the position and function of *objet a.* He writes:

> Although, in both cases, the link between object and loss is crucial, in the case of the *objet a* as the object of *desire*, we have an object which was originally lost, which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as lost, while, in the case of the *objet a* as the object of drive, the 'object' *is directly the loss itself*—in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the *lost object* to *loss itself as an object*. That is to say, the weird movement called 'drive' is not driven by the 'impossible' quest for the lost object; it is *a push to directly enact the 'loss'—the gap, cut, distance—itself* (2008: 328).

Drive is a kind of compulsion or force, a force that is shaped, that takes its form and pulsion, from loss. Drive is loss as a force or the force loss exerts on the field of desire. Differently put, it's the compulsive shape of networked media as they enact the loss of symbolic efficiency. To be clear, this enactment is neither an effort to restore the symbolic nor to replace the phallic signifier. Rather, it's the 'extraordinarily plastic' movement of the drives, to borrow Freud's expression. Freud continues, 'They may appear in each others' places. One of them may accumulate the intensity of the other' (from the *Introductory Lectures*, quoted by Lacan 1997: 71).

That the drive is thwarted or sublimated means that it reaches it goal by other means, through other objects. Blocked in one direction, it splits into multiple vectors, into a network. If Freud views the process as akin to the flow of water into multiple tributaries and canals, we might also think of it as an acephalic power's attempt to constitute and reach its objects by any means necessary. Lacan emphasizes that the drives are partial drives. He specifies this idea as 'partial with regard to the biological finality of sexuality' (1981: 177). I understand the point to refer to the variety of changing, incomplete, and dispersed ways subjects enjoy. It's not the case that drives develop in a linear fashion from infant to adult.[14] Rather, they fragment and disperse

as they satisfy themselves via a variety of objects. As Copjec writes, 'It is as if the very function of the drive were this continuous opening up of small fractures between things' (2002: 43). Her language here is precise: the fractures are not of things but between them; the parts that are objects of the drives are not parts of wholes but parts that appear in the force of loss as new expressions of a whole (she uses Deleuze's example of the role of the close-up as a cinematic device: it's not part of a scene enlarged; rather, it's an expression of the whole of the scene, 2002: 53). Lacan refers to the partial object as an object of lack, an object that emerges in the void of the drive to provide the subject with satisfaction.

The last aspect of the conception of drive I want to emphasize is correlative to the part, namely, montage. Lacan conceives the montage of drive in the sense of surrealist collage; there is a constant jumping without transition between heterogeneous elements (1981: 169-170). Montage suggests movement without message, movement with intensity, movement outward and back. Disparate images and sounds shift and mutate without beginning or end, head or tail. Lacan: 'I think the resulting image would show the working of a dynamo connected up to a gas-tap, a peacock's feather emerges, and tickles the belly of a pretty woman, who is just lying there looking beautiful' (1981: 169). More contemporary ways to understand montage might be mash ups, samples, and remixes—or, our movement through contemporary communication and entertainment networks. I enter; I click; I link; I poke. Drive circulates, round and round, producing satisfaction even as it misses its aim, even as it emerges in the plastic network of the decline of symbolic efficiency.

6

Žižek's early work on cyberspace emphasizes the loss of virtuality as the gaps in the symbolic are filled. The circulation of contributions in the networks of communicative capitalism suggests a different structure, one characterized by drive. There is no 'cyberspace' that persists as its own domain. Rather, the networks of global communications connect through a variety of devices, technologies, and media—internet, mobile phones, television, global positioning systems, game platforms, etc. One of the more interesting features of massive multiplayer online role-playing games is the intersecting of game and non-game worlds: players can buy and trade currencies and characters outside the gamespace. The expansions and intensifications of networked interactions thus point not to a field closed to meaning as all possibilities are explored and filled-in but rather back to the non-all Real of human interaction.

In his later work, Žižek supplements the 'Lacanian account of the Real as that which "always returns to its place"—as that which remains the same in all possible (symbolic)

universes' (2006: 26). He adds the notion of a parallax Real, that is, a Real capable of accounting for the multiplicity of appearances of the same underlying Real. Such a parallax Real is a gap or shift between perspectives. It does not embody a substantial point of information or sensory perception (*you feel it in your gut; I feel it in my bones*). Rather, it is the shift from one perspective to another. The Real, then, does not refer to what is the same but to the 'hard bone of contention which pulverizes the sameness into the multitude of appearances' (2006: 26). It is retroactively posited as the necessary yet impossible cause of this very multiplicity. Thus, there are two aspects to the parallax Real: multiplicity and its impossible core, a 'purely virtual, actually nonexistent X' (2006: 26).

Such a notion of a parallax Real is well-suited to communicative capitalism. What appears is multiplicity, pulverization, the constant and repeated assertion of something else, something different. Yet, to the extent that the shifts of perspective appear immediately (without interpretation, meaning, elevation to the status of a universal) they obscure the fact of contention, as if the shifts were among a multitude of singularities each with its own perspective, none of which is more powerful, more structural, or more true than another (an example from the U.S. is the way that conservatives accuse liberals of racism when liberals argue for racial diversity in political appointments). What is obscured is the underlying gap or disavowal, the virtual X of fundamental antagonism. The multiplicity of shifts effaces their embeddedness in capitalism, more specifically, the communicative capitalism that makes their expression possible. If the Real is ultimately impossible, then it names the obstacle we come up against in our supposition and experience of reality. In communicative capitalism, that obstacle is the (missing) efficiency of the symbolic.

The Real of the internet is the circulatory movement of drive—the repeated making, uploading, sampling, the constant pulverization that occurs as movement on the internet doubles itself, becoming itself and its record or trace—effected by symbolic efficiency as loss. The movement from link to link, the forwarding and storing and commenting, the contributing without expectation of response but in hope of further movement (why else count page views?) is circulation for its own sake. Drive's circulation forms a loop. The empty space within it, then, is not the result of the loss of something that was there before and now is missing. The drive of the internet is not around the missing Master signifier (which is foreclosed rather than missing). Instead, it is the inside of the loop, the space of nothing that the loop makes appear. This endless loop that persists for its own sake is the difference that makes a difference between so-called old and new media. Old media sought to deliver messages. New media just circulates.

Understanding this circulation via drive enables us to grasp how we are captured in its loop, how the loop ensnares. First, we enjoy failure. Insofar as the aim of the drive is not to reach its goal but to enjoy, we enjoy our endless circulation, our repetitive loop. We cannot know certainly; we cannot know adequately.[15] But we can mobilize this loss, googling, checking Wikipedia, mistrusting it immediately, losing track of what we doing, going somewhere else. We are captured because we enjoy. This idea appears in writing that associates new media with drugs, 'users' and 'using,' as well as colloquial expressions like 'Facecrack' (as a friend said to me, well, why didn't you tell me Facebook is like crack? I'll be certain to sign up now!). Thomas Elsaesser illustrates the point via YouTube. Describing his movement among the links and videos, he writes, 'after an hour or so, one realizes on what fine a line one has to balance to keep one's sanity, between the joy of discovering the unexpected, the marvellous and occasionally even the miraculous, and the rapid descent into an equally palpable anxiety, staring into the void of a sheer bottomless amount of videos, with their proliferation of images, their banality or obscenity in sounds and commentary' (2008: 30). Failure, or what Elsaesser tags 'constructive instability,' is functional for communicative capitalism; it's our ensnarement in the loop of drive.

Second, we are captured in our passivity; in the absence of an ego ideal, we remain passive. The information age is an age wherein we lack the information we need to act. Moreover, as communicative capitalism incites continuous search for information, it renders information perpetually out of reach. A concrete example here is the George W. Bush administration's torture policy. Before and after Bush left office, a refrain circulated concerning the need to get to the truth of the situation, to see more photographs, to read more documents—as if had not been known sense at least 2004 that the U.S. was torturing prisoners captured in the so-called war on terror. Since photographs and documents already were circulating, since members of the Bush administration—including Vice President Cheney—had already acknowledged that they did in fact approve the policy of torture, the problem was not the absence of information. What was missing is instead more radical, namely, a capacity to see ourselves as acting.

Christian Marazzi makes a similar point in his description of imitative behavior among those working in the finance sector. He writes, 'One important result of the empirical studies of the behavioral finance theorists is this very notion of *imitative behavior* based on the *structural information deficits* of all investors, be they large or small. . . The modalities of communication of what the "others" consider a good stock to invest in counts more than what is communicated' (2008: 23).[16] As is well known, an imitative, competitive relation to others is a characteristic of

imaginary identification. It makes sense, then, to recognize this imitative behavior as indicative of the decline of symbolic efficiency. Unable to find a standpoint from which to assess the adequacy of the available information, bond traders and hedge fund managers simply mimic those around them, stuck in the circuits of global finance.

The gaze draws us to a third way we are captured in contemporary communication networks. Because the gaps are not filled, because they cannot be filled, we are drawn to them, inscribing ourselves in the images we see, the texts that we read. So although online interactions might initially appear as so many ways that we search for ourselves, trying to know who we are, to pull together our fragmented identities, the other aspect of the gaze, its traumatic disruption of the image, is perhaps even more crucial. I can approach the same idea from a different direction: the satisfaction provided by identifying with a group also arises from transgressing the group's expectations. Scary zombie pop-ups spliced into conventional YouTube videos illustrate this point. Just as the viewer has become absorbed in the video, perhaps searching for the ghost or the key to the magic trick, a monstrous image (usually accompanied by a hideous scream) shocks her out of her absorption, reminding her that, in a way, the fault is hers—she shouldn't have been wasting her time watching videos online, shouldn't have let her guard down, shouldn't have presumed that the video images had a flow independent of her investment in them.

Although my discussion of drive draws heavily from Žižek, there is a difference. Žižek emphasizes that the 'stuckness' of drive (what I've been treating as capture) is the intrusion of radical break or imbalance: 'drive is quite literally *the very "drive" to break the All of continuity in which we are embedded*, to introduce a radical imbalance into it' (2006: 63). My argument is that communicative capitalism is a formation that relies on this imbalance, on the repeated suspension of narratives, patterns, identities, norms, etc. Under conditions of the decline of symbolic efficiency, drive is not an act; it does not break out of a set of given expectations because such sets no longer persist as coherent enchainments of meaning. On the contrary, the circulation of drive is functional for the prevention of such enchainments, enchainments that might well enable radical political opposition. The contemporary challenge, then, is producing the conditions of possibility for breaking out of or redirecting the loop of drive.

7

Kittler's reading of Lacan emphasizes the structuralist Lacan of the symbolic. Focusing on the machinic dimension of language, Kittler neglects the Real circuit of drive. He can thus conceive of a cybernetic loop capable of excluding humans altogether. It is almost as if he remains more

of a humanist than he wants to admit: his technology cryptograms, surface-wave filters, computational devices, and fiber optic cables fail to acknowledge the inhuman core of the drives at the heart of the human thereby allowing the fantasy *if only there were more of a human element*. The snares of communicative capitalism, the lures of Web 2.0, have already deactivated this fantasy of humans outside the networks. Žižek writes, 'We become "human" when we get caught into a closed, self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it' (2006: 63). The result is that the participatory, creative, engaging internet of Web 2.0 is more of a trap than Kittler's cybernetic machines.

[1]I am grateful to Justin Clemens and Dominic Pettman for their critical remarks on an initial draft of this essay.

Notes

For an overview that emphasizes the debate over subjectivity, identity, and the body, see Bolter and Grusin (2002). To be sure, these were not the only approaches taken to networked media; however, they were crucial steps for humanities scholars' rejection of the assumption that computers were necessarily tools of control and alienation rather than opportunities for transgression and creativity.

[2] As will become clear below, this 'return' in no way implies the return of the so-called liberal humanist subject, which in fact has never existed but only 'insisted' and this primarily in the writings of those most intent on eliminating it (for example, Hayles 1999). To this extent, the argument here has affinities with the position developed by Justin Clemens and Dominic Pettman (2004) regarding the instability of the category of the human as well as its dependence on the objects that enable it to speak. Note as well Flusser's meditations on humanizations (2002: 181-191).

[3]Poster (2001) raises this question.

[4]In the best book on surveillance and new media to date, Mark Andrejevic puts the concept to excellent use (2007: 251-254) 251-254. Chun also draws from Žižek notion of the decline of symbolic efficiency, although she misses his point completely (2006: 269-271). Chun wrongly suggests that Žižek believes that 'reasserting symbolic paternal authority will reinforce symbolic authority' omitting entirely from her analysis his discussion of the death(s) of the father(s) in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999).

[5]As Lacan makes clear in Seminar XVII (2007), there are different discourses, with different structures, within which the Master occupies different positions.

[6]Dany-Robert Dufour (2008) has a similar discussion.

[7]By way of contrast, consider Poster's celebratory approach to performativity as self-constitution (2001: 75).

[8]Žižek: 'In short, the properly dialectical paradox resides in the fact that *the very 'empirical', explicit realization of a principle undermines its reign*' (1996: 195).

[9]Žižek: 'The suspension of the function of the (symbolic) Master is the crucial feature of the Real whose contours loom on the horizon of the cyberspace universe' (1997: 154).

[10]This is not the only significant overlap. For example, in a more historically grounded discussion of the uncertainties involved in telling the difference between human and machine, a problem Žižek links to cyberspace, Kittler views the problem as preceding even Alan Turing's computer experiments and locates it in the emergence of storage media, particularly film (1999: 146).

[11]The description of Kittler is from Hansen (2004: 70).

[12]Hansen: 'Faced with the all-too-frequent contemporary predicament of "not being able to believe your eyes," are we not indeed impelled to find other ways to ground belief, ways that reactivate the

bodily modalities—tactility, affectivity, proprioception—from which images acquire their force and their 'reality' in the first place?" (2004: 105).

[13]This term comes from Raymond Ruyer, from whom Hansen draws in this section (2004: 79-84).

[14]Lacan: 'the passage from the oral drive to the anal drive can be produced not by a process of maturation, but by the intervention of something that does not belong to the field of the drive—by the intervention, the overthrow, of the demand of the Other,' (1981: 180).

[15]Andrejevic (2007) documents the cycle of suspicion with respect to forms of peer-to-peer monitoring and surveillance.

[16]Marazzia: 'The *mimetic relationship* between the individual economic actor and the others (the aggressive "crowd" of investors/speculators has its rationality in everyone's lack of knowledge,' (2008: 129).

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