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From the Sublime to the Hysterical Sublime: Reading the End of the World Against the Singularity

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Classical liberal philosophy, like Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, justifies the political order through a of mythical "state of nature," prior to civilisation. Hobbes describes the state of nature as a war of "every man against every man." His solution is that individuals should give up their rights to self-defence and place such authority into the hands of the Sovereign to whom all submit as the only *legitimate* force. Inconsistencies of (human) nature revert here, as they still do today, into justifications for the reigning order. Neoliberals, for instance, argue for the naturalness of market competition with reference to Hobbes' state of nature. It is interesting, then, that authors like Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright return to *Leviathan* to theorise the political conditions of the *contemporary* state of nature, that is, of climate change. In *Climate Leviathan*, Mann and Wainwright examine the crisis of climate change according to two intersecting political and economic problematics: that of capitalism and that of the state.¹ They ask whether or not the world to come in the face of

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climate change will continue to be capitalist; and, whether or not the world will be governed by some kind of planetary Leviathan-like sovereign to mitigate the effects of the crisis. The intersection between these problematics results in four possibilities that inform their matrix of analysis: they call the capitalist sovereign the Climate Leviathan; the capitalist non-sovereign they call the Climate Behemoth; the non-capitalist sovereign they call Climate Mao; and, the non-capitalist and non-sovereign they call Climate X. Climate Leviathan is somewhat akin to Hobbes' Leviathan, where capitalism and the capitalist class state persists into the future. Climate Behemoth, in contrast, appears to be something like a reactionary formation within capitalism. Climate Mao correlates with the Chinese model of state-authoritarianism; whereas, Climate X proposes the as yet unknown anti-state and anti-capitalist alternative.

The models that Mann and Wainwright devise are similar to those proposed by Peter Frase in his book, *Four Futures*, where he suggests that the twin problems of the twenty-first century will be climate change and automation.² Climate change and automation will force us to contend with questions about scarcity and inequality. Frase develops a political schema ("four futures") for what may result. A world of equality and abundance he calls Communism; the world of hierarchy and abundance, he calls Rentism; the world of equality and scarcity, he calls Socialism; and, the world of hierarchy and scarcity, he calls Exterminism. The four futures overlap with the climate Leviathan, although with some differences. Notably, Frase considers the climate crisis measured against the dilemma of automation. Doing so, I agree, allows us to more properly measure the human ethical dimension, caught between nature and culture, or technology. Two "ends" of sorts structure this dimension: the end of nature and the end of humanity—the "end of the world" or the so-called singularity. On this point, I believe psychoanalysis provides an ethical program for conceiving this dilemma, which I approach through the aesthetic category of the sublime.

How the Signifier Falls Into the Signified

Sigmund Freud writes in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that, “as a member of the human community, and with the help of technology guided by science, one can go over to the attack on nature and subject it to the human will.”³ The implications in this statement resonate well with a Hegelian universalism that departs from the kind of Spinozist and Deleuzian materialism occupying much critical theory today (particularly in the various new vitalist materialisms, object-oriented ontologies, and posthumanisms). If we consider the Hegelian proposal that the subject emerges as a crack in the purely immanent substance of the world (that is, not only as substance but also as subject), then we can also see to some degree how the freedom that emerges from the negation of the immediate (through communication, through sexual *perversions*, through technology, etc.) also brings forth the kind of alienation that Freud addresses in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Immediacy, as Gregor Moder puts it, is always a lost immediacy—it is an immediacy that we can only know from the position of alienation.⁴ Such an immediacy, lost prior to (or as a result of) subjectivisations, is only apprehensible in the form of the fantasy, which remains as the source of our sensation of alienation, which after all is what propels us into the position of desiring, and which is our real source of enjoyment. By subjecting nature to the human will, an alienation—a discontent—thus is born in the human community, which is at the same time the universal condition of the desiring subject.

The view expressed in Freud’s statement contains a number of ramifications with regards to both the analytical discourse, as well as for the relationship between the human subject and the non-human. Psychoanalysis shares with historical materialism the insight that knowledge bears upon the subject’s acting on both the world and itself, and is therefore capable of transforming both. This is one way of interpreting the Lacanian logic of the signifier falling into the signified, or of the Symbolic having an effect in the Real.⁵ Discourse reifies abstract phenomena into objects of knowledge allowing us to act upon and so change them. Objects do not exist merely in discourse, but their representation in discourse allows us to so transform them, producing an equal

transformation in both substance and subject. The analytical discourse is the product of the hysterical subject who *creates* new knowledge: the foundation upon which analysis is based. The hysteric troubles the Other with the question: *ché vuoi?* What am I to you? Why am I what you (*le grand Autre*) are saying that I am? It is a question that so begins the production of the analytical knowledge/discourse.

The scientific discourse operates in this way, too. It translates empirical data into objects upon which we can act. Nature, for instance, is an abstract phenomenon—Real, material, but nonetheless abstract at the level of our cognition—it is *das Ding*. Science makes it possible to extract from nature, to appropriate, and create the new. This is how the scientific discourse develops new technologies. The creation of the new has the reciprocal dimension of impacting upon us, on our know-how, on the evolution of the human subject, which is what gives knowledge its historical fervour. The fact that knowledge makes possible our acting upon the world indicates the utter necessity of ethical thinking given that our individual and particular actions have universal consequences: not only consequences for ourselves, but for the entirety of the human community, impacted as it is by the non-human—that is, by the substance that is always already lost. *Ethics*, that is, not as some kind of autonomous or normative realm, separate from the social reality; ethics is the product of thinking, of reasoning. The act, after all, is the result of taking thought all the way to its reasonable ends.

Psychoanalysis is much more far-reaching and universal than we might expect here. The ethics of psychoanalysis is a universalism insofar as the subject is interpellated at a foundational level by the Symbolic order, which precedes it. The new is produced when the subject brings to consciousness, through its own ethical gesture of not giving way to its desire (that is, the series of negations—“that’s not it”—that drive the subject’s enjoyment), that *it is itself the positing source of its own limitations*. But there is a sense in which the completion of the analytical treatment is only fully possible in conditions of universal emancipation, where the conscious *apprehension* of alienation becomes universal. In this sense, there is a correlation between the ethics of psychoanalysis and historical materialism. The two overlap around the ethical ambiguities of two

interrelated phenomena today: the existential threat of climate change, and the rise of new technological advancements in machine learning.

These phenomena are interrelated at the level of production in as much as the growth of technology has historically been the result of our extractions from nature, based upon certain historical stages in our scientific knowledge, as well as the various historical stages in the mode of production, which has led to developments in land cultivation and agriculture, industrialisation, mechanisation, and digital automation. The age of the Anthropocene, thus, forces us to ask, what is to be done?

This dilemma is conflated by two morbid or gothic fantasies of the present age: the fantasy of the end of the world, and that of the technological singularity. Each in its own way is a fantasy of a return to immediacy and the end of humanity as we know it. The former is best rendered by Fredric Jameson's thesis: "it seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of later capitalism."⁶ I read this statement against the Autonomist Marxist reading of the "general intellect" found in Marx's "Fragment on Machines" in the *Grundrisse*.⁷ General intellect is a description that comes close to the notion of the technological singularity surpassing human intelligence. These two fantasies relate to the two sides of the modern and the postmodern sublime: the natural and the technological.

The aesthetic category of the sublime has been read more traditionally, within the realm of nature or the natural; but there is also a sense here of the *hysterical* sublime that Jameson identifies in his writing on postmodernism. There is an hysterical sublime discovered in the mechanisms humanity has devised in the process of self-alienation from nature, and from our attempts to so dominate it. But this sublime is of the second order, whereby our universal admiration and inspiration from nature has been so transformed into a representation of the deleterious, perhaps even threatening dimensions of human culture, producing out of nature our technologies, which may now come back to bite us in the ass. The sublime object, and the hysterical sublime, thus offer us an avenue for conceiving this dilemma in the Lacanian-Hegelian register.

The Most Sublime Hysteric

The *experience* of the sublime for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is similar to that described by Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, the sublime can be thought in relation to representation, and develops out of the distinction between phenomena and noumena. Phenomena are those experiences that can be easily translated and represented in discourse that make them comprehensible and more concrete. Noumena, however, refer to those objects that stand outside of human sense perception, which we are not able to apprehend due to the limitations of our minds and bodies. For Kant, we can know only our knowledge of things, but we cannot know things-in-themselves. The sublime, then, for Kant, speaks to our ability to come closer to knowing the thing-in-itself, even if we can never breach that limitation. The difference for Hegel lies with the way that he (as a reaction to Spinoza) *subtracts* the idea that some substantial *Thing* persists *beyond* our experience.

For Hegel, our experience of contradiction is what indicates the rupture of pure immanence. For him, the sublime brings us close to the gap in phenomenal reality. Hegel's position is that the "negative experience of the Thing must change into the experience of the Thing-in-itself as radical negativity."⁸ What Kant perceives as a limitation to our experiences of reality is for Hegel the very reality itself. It's not that we are limited from experiencing the true substance of reality; for Hegel, the limit just *is* reality. Reality is itself traversed by a series of cracks and fissures. What lacks in the subject is redoubled into substance *as* lacking, or as always already inconsistent with itself. For Hegel, the way to overcome the limits of representation is by recognising that immediacy is always a lost immediacy. Absolute Knowing is rendered by the teleological within the sublime. The sublime allows us to apprehend the Absolute in its failure to be represented adequately.⁹ I call this experience the "hysterical sublime" or the "hysteric's sublime." It is the sublime as conceived by Hegel, who Jacques Lacan referred to as "the most sublime hysteric" (*le plus sublime des hystériques*)¹⁰—thus, the hysteric's sublime; but it is also the sublime of the hysteric who perceives the crack in the Other, and by questioning it, produces new knowledge. I'll elaborate.

We need to begin with the *origin story* of the subject in the forced choice of being. As Slavoj Žižek recalls, Lacan develops this line in two different places where he divides the Cartesian *cogito* into the “I think” and the “I am.” In Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan claims that the subject chooses thought and loses being.¹¹ However, a few years later, in Seminar XIV, *The Logic of Fantasy*, he proposes instead that the subject is forced to choose being, and thought is relegated to the position of the unconscious: I am, therefore it (the unconscious) thinks. Rather than read these two versions as mutually exclusive, Žižek proposes interpreting them according to the logics of sexualization. The masculine subject opts for the second choice, that of being; whereas the feminine subject chooses thought.¹² We can justify this distinction when we read the two logics according to their orientation towards the phallic signifier; and we need to read this orientation according to the binary logic of the affirmation and the negation. Whereas the masculine subject is the one who affirms the phallus as the signifier of castration (choosing being over thought), the feminine subject negates the phallic signifier; however, she is still oriented towards it in a relation of negation (choosing thought over being). Masculine and feminine are not *biological* identities; they are identifications with the signifier. The masculine subject affirms it, whereas the feminine subject identifies with it in the form of the questioning or the troubling, that is, the thinking, of it. This fact connects to our thinking of the logic of the fantasy, and its relation to the sublime object.

In the forced choice of being, the subject is caught in a primordial act of affirmation and negation. By affirming the signifier (“I am this”)—which reflects how the subject perceives itself from the perspective of the Other, of the Symbolic order—the subject negates what it is not through what it perceives as the Other’s desire. But in this very act of negation, there is a remainder, a fantasy of the choices not chosen, and this is what produces the subject as desiring. We come to understand the Lacanian *object a* as the very objectification of this lack—the lack identified as the choices not chosen. The limit here, for the subject, is unconsciously self-imposed (it and not the Other makes the choice), but in order to perceive the object as phenomenally possible it must displace this obstacle onto the Other. While we equate desire with the lost object, what we truly

desire is the obstacle, the limit, without which we would realise that the object does not exist.¹³ We think that enjoyment will derive from attaining the lost object—lost in our very act of choice, of negating it—when in fact, we always already procure enjoyment from the fantasy.¹⁴ This lost object is what is sublime in the Lacanian register, and reflects the lost immediacy of a foundational substance. It is a remainder/reminder of what we negate to become what we are. This negation demonstrates in the Hegelian register that, just as the subject is lacking, so too is substance.

Put differently, and in terms that are relevant for *hystericising* substance, we must recognise that no possibility exists for creating some new harmony between humanity and nature. This is where some of the vitalist new materialists fail, by perceiving the potentials for a renewed harmony simply by withdrawing human agency, what Steven Shaviro, for instance, theorises as an escape from Anthropocentrism through a strategic Anthropomorphism.¹⁵ For me, this fantasy for a renewed harmony—a return to lost substance—is one of the central fantasies of the Anthropocene. We desire the *fantasy* of a lost nature more so than the possibility of a renewed harmony; and, its inverse is not a fantasy of a renewed harmony, but the fantasy of the end of the world—of total destruction from the climate disaster.

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The hysteric and feminine subject overlap in their position of questioning. Whereas the masculine subject, in affirming the phallic signifier, adopts the identity it registers in the Other's desire (I am this), the feminine subject is in a place of questioning the Other: why am I what you (the big Other) are saying that I am? This question is the one, still, posed by all subjects at that foundational point of the primordial forced choice, and the resulting choice is an attempt to satisfy the desire of the Other. But in the case of the feminine hysteric, the question is turned back to the Other asking why am I what you are saying that I am? We should read Lacan's discourse of the hysteric in precisely these terms.

In the formula for the hysteric's discourse, the subject (\$) is in the position of the agent, the master-signifier (S₁) is in the position of the worker,

knowledge (the Symbolic) is in the position of production, and the *object a* is in the position of truth.

$$\frac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

By questioning the master-signifier—*Chè vuoi?*—the hysterical subject is responsible for helping to procure a new knowledge (S_2). Specifically, in this context, the hysteric is what drives the production of the Freudian analytical discourse. The hysteric sets it in motion and allows the analytic discourse to formulate its own object: the unconscious. This new knowledge reveals that coming to grasp the object *as* an object of discourse is the only way to create the conditions for so acting upon it and transforming it (and consequently the subject, too). The idea that knowledge changes reality, as Žižek notes, is what psychoanalysis shares both with scientific discourse as well as with historical materialism.¹⁶

If the masculine enjoyment is the enjoyment of the fantasy ($\$ \langle a \rangle$), then the feminine enjoyment, according to Lacan, is tied to the Symbolic, to the production of knowledge (or even knowing, that is, absolute knowing in the Hegelian sense—the capacity to reason, to experience the infinite and unlimited). But there is a corollary here, as well, with the production of scientific knowledge and with the scientific discourse. We see this manifestly in the production of embodied knowledge in the form of technology—what Lacan playfully calls *lathouse*.¹⁷ *Lathouse* are, as Žižek explains, embodied scientific knowledge (a kind of surplus-knowledge).¹⁸ They are what Clint Burnham describes as surplus objects embodying *jouissance*, which did not precede the subject in some primordial substance, like nature. They are technological prosthetics that embody libidinal enjoyment, but which have been developed by human subjects.¹⁹ This is what calls forth the need to have ready the theory of the postmodern hysterical sublime that Jameson describes.

... To the Hysterical Sublime

For Jameson, the postmodern hysterical sublime is distinguished from the modern sublime for the fact that it reveals our relationships with technology rather than with nature. It contains still those feelings of amazement, awe, and astonishment that we find in the modern conception of the sublime (even the teleological and the ethical), only now what shocks us are the very products of our own invention: the technological (and even cultural, that is, to cultivate—the human act of so transforming nature). Just as Freud describes how the human community may subject nature to the human will through technology, now we fear most losing control of the very thing that we ourselves have created. There is a sense in which a conception of the hysterical sublime was also found in Marx, particularly in his rendering of the “general intellect.”

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes that the development of machinery is the culmination of the different metamorphoses through which the labour process undergoes in the production process of capital. It can or will at some point in its development transform into a system of automatic production, put in motion by a power that moves itself.²⁰ Machinery, he writes, objectifies and appropriates living (human) labour, coming to dominate it in the very form of capital. Automation is the complete objectification, not only of living labour, but of the general intellect—that is, of the accumulation of society’s scientific knowledge.²¹ Two opposed fantasies present themselves with the contemporary realisation of Marx’s reading of automation: first, is the accelerationist fantasy of a world without work; the second is the hysterical sublime, the nightmare fantasy of a world without *us*.

Accelerationist thinkers, like Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, foresee the possibility of a fully automated society (what some refer to as fully automated luxury communism), where the drudgery of labour is alleviated due to the growth of labour saving technology.²² However, given the historical conditions and contexts of capitalist society, many others now fear the steady replacement and stagnation of labourers as a cost saving practice of capital (that is, “finding efficiencies”), which as Jameson argues is the true plot of Marx’s *Capital*.²³ It is, he claims, the story of

unemployment as an inevitable course for capitalism, rather than merely class struggle. Of course, greater proletarianisation is one of the central causes of capitalist crisis, when wage labour is the source of surplus value in the production process. For capitalists to maintain the production of surplus value in a fully automated society they would have to pay the machines for their labour (which would, of course, contradict the very reason for their employment in the first place). From my perspective, it is the fact of proletarianisation that outweighs the rise of the general intellect—or the “singularity,” the hypothetical future moment when the growth of technology becomes so uncontrollable and inevitably overpowers the human civilisation—turning around Freud’s remark that the human will overpower nature through technology; now technology overpowers us since it is the stagnation of human subjects that make such a transformation political.

Jameson, for his part, theorises the hysterical sublime as the manner in which the whole, or the totality, of the capitalist mode of production is experienced in postmodern capitalism. What we come to grasp through the hysterical sublime is not merely the fear and panic set up in the face of the singularity, but of the total and maybe even unrepresentable dimensions and reach of the entire network of global capitalism. Technology becomes a way to perform the kind of cognitive mapping that Jameson proposes as a means to radically transform our conditions in late capitalism; and, it is important that he describes this process, drawing on Lacan, as the product of the Symbolic having an effect in the Real.²⁴

Capitalism has proven itself to be a force that has so gone on the attack on nature, to exploit it, not merely for the production of our needs, but for the accumulation of wealth and power for the few. In the process, it has disposed of the many and has opted to replace us with cheaper and more efficient alternatives. But our newer and smarter environments in digital culture only testify to the fact that the knowledge embodied in our gadgets have now come to be totally integrated into nature itself. Which is to say that at this point in our history, no part of nature escapes the human footprint. But it shows, precisely, just how much the human impact can have upon the world. This is why Andreas Malm, for instance, proposes that “*any* call for a more environmentally beneficial practice by necessity puts humans front and centre.”²⁵ He adds that human beings

need to take responsibility for exploiting nature, not by subtracting ourselves, but by still acting upon the world. Human beings, he writes, “are the only ones who could *possibly* rise up and shake off fossil fuels from their economies. It seems a rather dispiriting and demobilising move to tell them that they are nothing special, that nothing separates them from animal or machine.”²⁶

Psychoanalysis and historical materialism show, not only the way that our knowledge impacts reality; both also teach us that an inherent ethics is attached to this knowledge, one that comes from our relationship with the sublime. We may act ethically only insofar as we know. The Anthropocene is now the term commonly used to prove the human impact on the planet—to show that human activities have launched the planet into a wholly new geological period. This is not all bad news. As Jameson tells us, “The glory of the Anthropocene . . . has been to show us that we really can change the world. Now it would be intelligent to terraform it.”²⁷ Perhaps this is how we might imagine what Mann and Wainwright call Climate X.

Notes

1. Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (New York: Verso, 2018).
2. Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2016).
3. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. Todd Dufresne, trans. Gregory C. Richter (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2016), 57.
4. Gregor Moder, *Hegel and Spinoza: Substance and Negativity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 76.
5. This logic is best rendered by Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 79.
6. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii.
7. See, for instance, Antonio Negri, “Constituent Republic,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 213–22; Paolo Virno, “Notes on the General Intellect,” in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*,

- ed. Saree Makdisi et al. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 265–72; and, Maurizio Lazzarato, “General Intellect: Towards an Inquiry into Immaterial Labour,” in *Immaterial Labour, Mass Intellectuality, New Constitution, Post-Fordism and All That* (London: Red Notes, 1994).
8. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 205–6.
 9. Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 25.
 10. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 35.
 11. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).
 12. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 58–61.
 13. See Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
 14. See McGowan, *Emancipation After Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
 15. Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 61.
 16. Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 228.
 17. Lacan, *Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 162.
 18. Žižek, *Incontinence*, 144.
 19. Clint Burnham, *Does the Internet Have an Unconscious? Slavoj Žižek and Digital Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 52.
 20. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Margit Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993), 692.
 21. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 694.
 22. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (New York: Verso, 2015).
 23. Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (New York: Verso, 2011).
 24. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 146 (1984): 92, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/I146/articles/fredric-jameson-postmodernism-or-the-cultural-logic-of-late-capitalism>.

25. Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso, 2018), 116; emphasis in the original.
26. Malm, *Progress of This Storm*, 118; emphasis in the original.
27. Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2019), 348.

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