

# Postmodernity and the Politics of Fragmentation<sup>1</sup>

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"Belief + Doubt," installation by Barbara Kruger (Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC, 2012)

## I. Introduction

The cultural attitude of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century may perhaps one day be known as "the assault on concentration." In an endless stream of information, the "new" is

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is an elaboration and extension of an argument presented in three blog posts on the *Against Professional Philosophy* site during the summer of 2019. The first two posts were in response to a short essay written by Andrew D. Chapman, "Thoughts on the Relationship between Postmodernism and Fascism," *Against Professional Philosophy* (10 April 2019), available online at URL = <<https://againstprofphil.org/2019/04/10/thoughts-on-the-relationship-between-postmodernism-and-fascism/>>, and the third post was a response to a short essay by Michelle Maiese, "Smithereens: Reflections in a Black Mirror," *Against Professional Philosophy* (24 June 2019), available online at URL = <<https://againstprofphil.org/2019/06/24/smithereens-reflections-in-a-black-mirror/>>. See also, respectively, O. Paans, "Thoughts on Postmodernity 1: An Impossible Presentation," *Against Professional Philosophy* (16 August 2019), available online at URL = <<https://againstprofphil.org/2019/08/16/thoughts-on-postmodernity-1-an-impossible-presentation/>>; O. Paans, "Thoughts on Postmodernity 2: The Tensions of the Past and the Fluidity of the Present," *Against Professional Philosophy* (6 September 2019), available online at URL = <<https://againstprofphil.org/2019/09/06/thoughts-on-postmodernity-2-the-tensions-of-the-past-and-the-fluidity-of-the-present/>>; and O. Paans, "Fragments of Reality, Fragments of Solidarity," *Against Professional Philosophy* (23 August 2019), available online at URL = <<https://againstprofphil.org/2019/08/23/fragments-of-reality-fragments-of-solidarity/>>. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Robert Hanna, editor at APP, for helpful remarks and for editing the successive posts as they were published.

what counts. And when the “new” is endlessly replenished, concentration is superfluous. One does not need concentration when reality effortlessly floats by like a series of fragments, images, stimuli, informational content, episodes of a TV series, or handy slogans.

While this statement may sound unduly pessimistic or even dystopian, there is no denying that fragmentation forms an integral part of our everyday reality. However, even this disjointed reality is open to analysis and scrutiny. Particularly, it can be understood in a historical sense, because the current culture of ceaseless stimulation did not come into being overnight. Instead, contemporary postmodern culture can be seen as a counter-response to the extremities of high modernism, yet also simultaneously as its latest re-iteration. Instead of seeking to reduce the phenomenon of postmodernity to a single, all-encompassing definition, its very mode of existence must be understood as being radically split asunder. One consequence of this constitutive rift in postmodern culture is the gradual emergence of “the politics of fragmentation.” The genesis and the consequences of this fragmentation will be the subject of this essay.

My overall line of argument has three basic steps:

1. Postmodernity is not as “post” modern as it proclaims. It is the inevitable culmination and radicalization of some of modernism’s implicit, instrumental tendencies. Moreover, Postmodernity is the latest manifestation of a modern culture that is reflexively affecting its own development. (Section II)
2. This Modern-rather-than-Postmodern culture has created the conditions for a new kind of politics: the politics of fragmentation. This fragmentation is dependent on a number of cinematographic techniques that mediate our access to reality. (Section III)
3. The politics of fragmentation can be observed in a number of contemporary cultural and political trends such as: the return to nationalism; the emergence of neofascism; the occurrence of multiple forms of neo-modernism; the deterioration of prolonged solidarity; and furthermore, self-commodification. (Section IV)

## **II. Becoming Postmodern**

There is a considerable literature that attempts to define what postmodernism is or does. That describing a cultural phenomenon results in somewhat blurry definitions should not surprise us—the very term “postmodernism” fails to capture what it intends to clarify. However, there seems to be a broad consensus that either

(i) postmodernity as a whole is a reaction against the extremes of modernism in all spheres of life, such as artistic practice, scientific views, and industrial production, or (ii) postmodernity is the combination of modernity with a host of other factors that mitigate or diversify modernism's extremes. This recombination defies narrative logic, questions conventional forms of knowledge production that developed during modernism, creates new forms of social organization and anticipates new, flexible economy. Alternatively, terms like "Empire," "post-industrial society," or "multinational capitalism," are used to describe a new and still developing world-order.<sup>2</sup> One of its most salient features is highlighted by David Harvey:

I begin with what appears to be the most startling fact about postmodernism: its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic that formed the one half of Baudelaire's conception of modernity. But postmodernism responds to the fact of that in a very particular way. It does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the 'eternal and immutable' elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.<sup>3</sup>

Alternatively—and this line of thinking coheres with my outlook—postmodernity is regarded as a *transformation* of modernity. For instance, Charles Jencks maintains that postmodernity is modernity combined with a number of additional factors that diversify it.<sup>4</sup> For example, in architectural design, the modernist emphasis on functionalism and aesthetic austerity is, in postmodernity, enriched with an exuberant and deliberately ironic aesthetic, while the modernist, functionalist modes of thinking are still alive under the colorful surface.

A slightly different interpretation of this transformation is provided by the sociologist Ulrich Beck. His thesis of "reflexive modernity" entails that the ceaseless development and acceleration of modernity starts to affect the process of modernization itself.<sup>5</sup> Modern society becomes an object of concern for itself. In a reflexive gesture, the process of modernization changes its own functioning and

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<sup>2</sup> See F. Jameson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*, (Lecture transcript, partially delivered at The Whitney Museum, Fall 1982), available online at URL = [https://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson\\_Postmodernism\\_and\\_Consumer\\_Society.pdf](https://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson_Postmodernism_and_Consumer_Society.pdf); P. Sheenan, "Postmodernism and Philosophy," in S. Connor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 20–42; and C. Jencks, "What Then is Post-Modernism?," in C. Jencks (ed.), *The Post-Modern Reader* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), pp. 14–37.

<sup>3</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Jencks, "What Then is Post-Modernism?"

<sup>5</sup> U. Beck, "The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization," in U. Beck, A. Giddens, and S. Lash (eds.) *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Traditions and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (London: Polity, 2007) 1–55.

future development. Consequently, a global risk society emerges, in which old securities disappear and individuals are “condemned to be free.”<sup>6</sup>

That these concepts of “liquid modernity” or “reflexive modernity” lead easily to bold statements can also be discerned in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s hallmark study, *The Postmodern Condition*.<sup>7</sup> Notably, his claim that the “metanarratives” of history had ceased to function was taken as a mission statement of postmodernity, but it can also be read as simply a diagnosis that modernity had reached a new stage.

The subtitle of the *Postmodern Condition* is “*A Report on Knowledge*,” and indeed, a significant part of the book is about knowledge-production during a time when computers, automation-of-information, and digitalization more generally, took over. In this process, job prospects, education, institutional structures, and the role of “knowledge procedures” changed in ways that were unprecedented.

Lyotard’s assertion that the “metanarratives” were obsolete was not a political assertion in the sense that he advocated a new era of political engagement. Rather, it was the diagnosis of a historical situation: none of the existing metanarratives could do justice to the fluidity of the present. That Lyotard overplayed his hand here is clear: to judge that the metanarratives are obsolete is to place oneself in an external, extra-historical position. Moreover, if the claim is that *all metanarratives anywhere* are obsolete, one thereby creates a new narrative, assuming that it has universal validity. However, this statement reflects something of the overwhelming transformation of reality that was underway. If many old certainties melt into air, the response may be to exclaim that all hitherto developed ways of thinking are insufficient to comprehend what is happening.

If the traditional ways of thinking are obsolete, ineffective or insufficient, then a new set of intellectual strategies, tactics, and modes expression need to be invented. Thus, postmodernity exploits the fragmentation, disjointedness, and incoherence to which it bears witness, employing them as tools in a strategy for comprehension and sensemaking in a world that is perceived as being out of joint. Consequently, this choice is reflected in artistic and cultural production. Tactics like collage, pastiche, bricolage, and mixed media (and more recently “transmediality”) claim pride of place, suggesting themselves as the expressive tools that will succeed in capturing the cultural currents of today.

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., U. Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity* (London: SAGE Publications, 2013); and Z. Bauman, *Alone Again. Ethics after Certainty* (London: Demos, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Not coincidentally, in postmodern thinking, the concept of “bricolage” plays an important role. The very idea of pastiche, collage, and recombination appears as a logical consequence of the new, liquid situation in which a culture finds itself. If we look to one of the sources of this term, we see an important feature of the self-image of postmodernism:

[Lévi-Strauss] presents as what he calls bricolage what might be called the discourse of this method. The bricoleur, says Lévi-Strauss, is someone who uses “the means at hand,” that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogenous – and so forth.<sup>8</sup>

Bricolage is not necessarily derivative, recombinative, or purposively focused on juxtaposition: it is a mere makeshift approach for creating and designing. Bricolage contains an element of improvisation and surprise. Sometimes, putting an object or tool to use in ways for which it was not intended creates a perceptual shift. Marcel Duchamps’s display of the urinal comes to mind, as well as Andy Warhol’s Brillo boxes. One regards such objects with renewed insight into their possibilities if the context in which they appear is changed. Improvisation, borrowing, and heterogeneity characterize the working mode of the bricoleur. That this viewpoint leads quite easily to a dismissal of grand narratives or unifying discourses is demonstrated in Derrida’s next sentence:

If one calls bricolage the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur. The engineer, whom Lévi-Strauss opposes to the bricoleur, should be the one to construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon.<sup>9</sup>

The engineer is presented as a character who brings unity and thereby coherence in a discourse. However, the engineer himself is in reality a bricoleur of sorts. His concepts, ideas and methods do not fall ready-made from the heavens. This theme (“most conceptual characters are in reality just conceptual or mythic characters in a grand narrative”) remains a persistent thought in postmodern thinking. This is especially so since the “engineer” can be regarded as the paradigmatic figure of modernity.<sup>10</sup> It is the engineer who ensures a technology-driven highway of

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<sup>8</sup> J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 360; see also M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall. (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1988), pp. 29–39.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 360.

<sup>10</sup> See O. Paans, “The Generic Eternal: Modernism, Alienation and the Built Environment,” *Borderless Philosophy* 2 (2019): 207–256. Available online at: <<https://www.cckp.space/single->

progress, and who has always the final say, because he justifies his choices on the basis of the immutable laws of nature itself. Here, again, postmodernity displays a certain suspicion towards “discourses” that are unified around one system of references (numerical in the case of mathematics, genetic in the case of biology etc.). The creeping suspicion is that the unity of such discourses is an integral part of their myth, the idealized image that such disciplines present to the outside world.

Whether this postmodern suspicion is (fully) justified can be debated, but for now it suffices to say that this is a core postmodern commitment. The certainties of modernity are trusted and questioned in equal measure. It is the suspicion that provides the background for Lyotard’s claim about the obsolescence of essentialist, grand, unifying narratives. Yet, it is the technological advance of modernity that fuels and sustains postmodern cultural production.

Suspensions about all essentialist theories of human nature, or about classical rationalism, are easily explicable against the background of Lyotard’s claim, but also against the cultural background of the 1970s. Universities in France had to deal with widespread student revolts demanding a “democratization” of the universities in May 1968.<sup>11</sup> The United States was embroiled in societal and political opposition to the Vietnam war and struggled with the rise of counterculture movements. And the the USSR and Maoist China were widely perceived as global enemies to be reckoned with.

In addition, the largely inherited language of art had already been undermined by the likes of Marcel Duchamp, and the introduction of mechanical means for producing art. Andy Warhol had successfully emulated the visual language of commercials and pop culture. And in a move towards abstraction that had been set in motion in the early modernist art movements, high culture retreated into the quietist safe space of artistic Conceptualism. In such an unstable cultural climate, essentialist theories about human nature, or updated versions of classical rationalism, may seem like the worst possible explanations for making sense of the world. The contrary opposite of essentialism and classical rationalism, namely, some or another version of relativistic empiricism, is then also seen as a pluralistic safe space from ideological fanaticism, whether of the modernistic or Marxist sort:

[S]upposing that in the decades since the emergence of the great modern styles society has itself begun to fragment in this way, each group coming to speak a curious private language of its own, each profession developing its private code or

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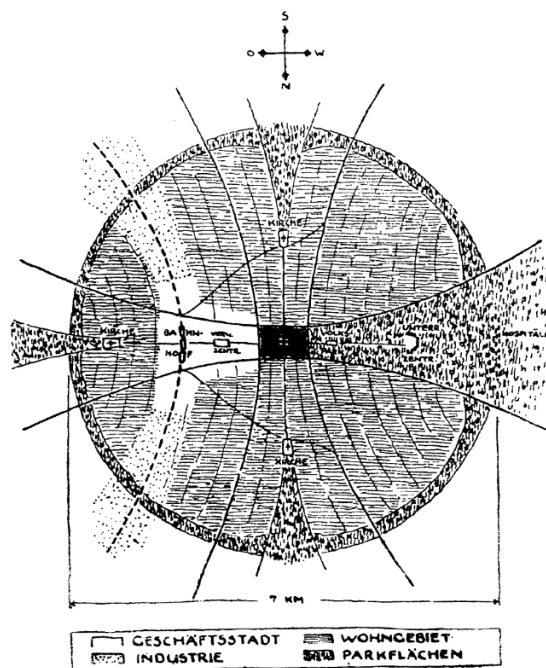
[post/2019/06/01/BP2-2019-The-Generic-Eternal-Modernism-Alienation-and-the-Built-Environment-pp-207-256](https://borderlessphilosophy.com/post/2019/06/01/BP2-2019-The-Generic-Eternal-Modernism-Alienation-and-the-Built-Environment-pp-207-256)>.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., S. Sim (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2001); and Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 40



idiolect, and finally each individual coming to be a kind of linguistic island, separated from everyone else? But then in that case, the very possibility of any linguistic norm in terms of which one could ridicule private languages and idiosyncratic styles would vanish, and we would have nothing but stylistic diversity and heterogeneity.<sup>12</sup>

The development that Frederick Jameson describes here should not be overlooked. In the heydays of “High Modernism” in the 1960s, its idiom had become a dialect itself. Consider the extreme abstraction practiced in the music of Poulenc or Boulez; the relentless reduction in the sculptures of Serra and Judd; and the idealized city planning models by Le Corbusier and Wijdeveldt: their reduction of life to functions had already carved out a portion of reality by itself, radically alienating itself from the nuances everyday life in favor of abstraction. While those inside those High-Modernist enclaves envisioned a direct and universal access to the order of reality, everyday life just continued and turned away from these idealizations: “we should start to build for people, and stop building for Man.”<sup>13</sup> Consider, for example, Bruno Taut’s 1919 “Plan for *The City Crown (Die Stadtkrone)*”:



“Plan for *The City Crown (Die Stadtkrone)*,” by Bruno Taut (1919)

<sup>12</sup> F. Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” (Lecture transcript, partially delivered at The Whitney Museum, Fall 1982), available online at URL = [https://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson\\_Postmodernism\\_and\\_Consumer\\_Society.pdf](https://art.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/Jameson_Postmodernism_and_Consumer_Society.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Sheenan, “Postmodernism and Philosophy,” pp. 25–27; and for a general discussion of this practical turn in 20<sup>th</sup>-century French philosophy, see B. Ieven, A. van Rooden, M. Schuilenburg, and S. van Tuinen (eds.) *De Nieuwe Franse Filosofie. Denkers en thema's voor de 21e eeuw* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Boom, 2011), pp. 8 and 19–20.

Taut's city plan was through-and-through modernist, and also a precursor to contemporary starchitecture, notably in its emphasis on defining the cityscape by individual landmark buildings. More generally, the modernist movement epitomized the idea of "building for Man."

The tendency of postmodernism to focus on the "first-person" viewpoint does away with all modernist fears of falling into excessive subjectivism and losing any direct connection with reality. Objectivity, after all, was seen as the lifeline that led directly to the set of formulae that constituted the only real world, namely, the scientific interpretation of nature as expressed by the exact sciences. Postmodernity rejects the idea of such a metalanguage or single, universal set of norms. It engages in a willful gesture of defiance against the universalizing tendencies of modernity. However, the irony and willful detachment of postmodernity is significantly more than just a counter response. It harbors a deeply escapist attitude towards reality itself. The attempt to question the existence of metalanguages cannot but lead to the point where everything that is expressed in them is held to be questionable.

To illustrate this point, Jean Baudrillard's remarks on Disneyland are very useful. According to Baudrillard, theme parks like Disneyland exist to convince us that *they* are fake representations of reality, while reassuring us that normal, regular reality is out there. In fact, the situation is reversed: the reality outside does no longer exist, and has become a hyperreal, a through-and-through fragmented world of informational pieces.<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard suggests that for such a system, a mental catastrophe or implosion is inevitable.<sup>15</sup> The moment of implosion is the realization that there *is* a reality out there, but that our access to it is heavily stunted, mediated, and directed. This is what I call "the politics of fragmentation." Like the Kantian thing-in-Itself, reality appears simultaneously as both a noumenal hyperreal object and also a "black box phenomenon." It seems within reach, yet it is impenetrable.

Nevertheless, the postmodern interest in the nature of collage, juxtaposition, and pastiche was not merely a rebellious response to modernism. It is also the result of an artistic undercurrent in modernity that originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The way we think about modernism nowadays is somewhat one-sided, as if the technology-driven Utopia is a representative image for the entirety of modern thought. To be sure, 20<sup>th</sup> century modernity is a "flat totalization," as Marshall aptly Berman puts it.<sup>16</sup> Universalized ideas about the self, the mind, city planning, art, and

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<sup>14</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S.F. Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>16</sup> M. Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 24.



economy led to a monolithic and totalized vision of human life.<sup>17</sup> This utopian vision is austere to the point of being inhospitable and uninhabitable. Yet this is but one side of modernism, an aspect that came to full fruition only over the full course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If we look at 19<sup>th</sup> century modernism, a different and multifaceted picture emerges.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the art movements of Expressionism and Suprematism, as well as De Stijl and Surrealism had long been experimenting with techniques of abstraction, geometrical composition, juxtaposition, and recombination. But the Second World War stunted and deformed an artistic current that no doubt would have developed in a different direction in the absence of the war. Nonetheless, the ominous signs that modernity was a field of tensions waiting to explode was already in the air. One need only read Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Byron, Gogol, Kafka, or Dostoyevsky to perceive the seeds of what became a core concept of the critics of modernity: alienation and desolation in the face of unstoppable development. This artistic trend is already visible before the First World War in the sculptures of Gustav Vigeland, the paintings of Edvard Munch and Paul Delvaux, or the Dutch art collective *De Ploeg*. Consider, for example, Gustav Vigeland's monolith in Frogner park, Oslo, Norway, 1924–1943:



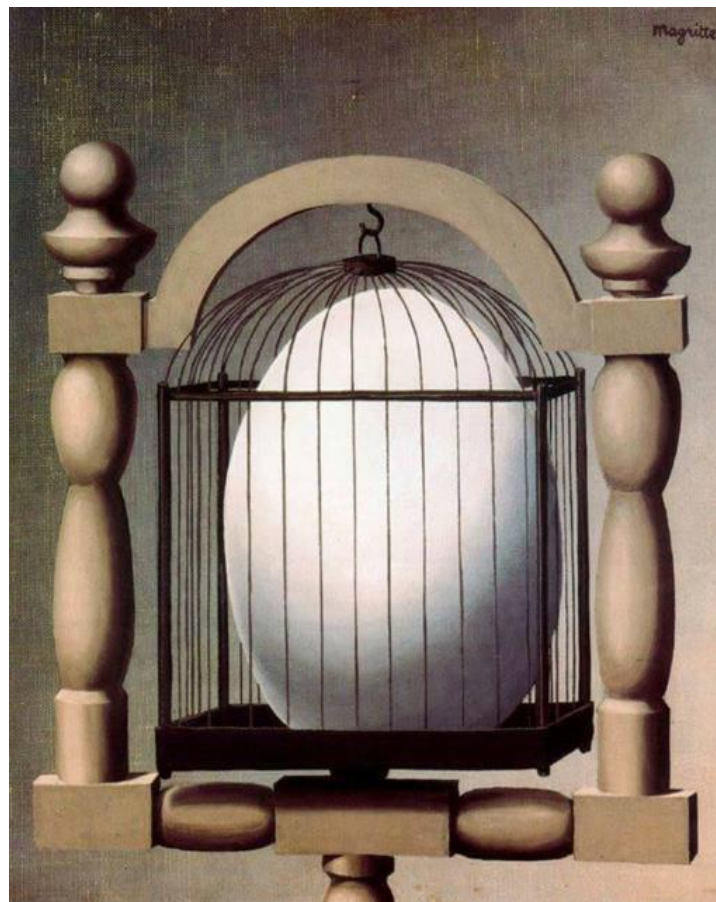
Author's photograph.

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<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1964); and M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013/1947).

The sculpture depicts 121 bodies reaching for the divine in a range of emotions. As in Picasso's and Dali's work, the expression and scale make the sculpture fascinating and unsettling in equal measure. Later on, Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso continued this line of modern artistry. Not just alienation and the underlying tensions of modernity figure in their works, but also a sense of doom and ominous foreboding—and in Dali's work, not seldom combined with a sense of maddening hopelessness and desperation. This tendency comes to a climax in Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Dali's *The Face of War* (1941).<sup>18</sup>

We encounter the same themes in René Magritte's paintings, for example, in his 1933 *Elective affinities*:



Magritte's seemingly tranquil and ordered compositions nevertheless convey the sense of a half-hidden, surreal dimension that is fundamentally "off": a nightmarish undercurrent that lies in wait just under the surface. This threatening tranquility is also present in Dali's *The First Study for the Madonna of Port Lligat* (1949). And even while surrealist art takes alienation to its extreme in its visual language, it nevertheless is figurative. What is striking is the play of images and fragments that

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<sup>18</sup> See also Jencks, "What then is Post-Modernism?" Jencks uses exactly the same examples, something I found out after this text had already been written.

seamlessly connect to the reality around them. A penetrating example is Dali's *Three Sphinxes of Bikini* (1947) which he painted as a response to US nuclear tests in the Pacific:



The theme of an irrational, blind, and ruthless force that underlies all currents of thought (and that in Delvaux's, Vigeland's, and Magritte's work is threatening to escape) is not a postmodern theme. It belongs to the undercurrent of art and literature that dealt with a sense of alienation, an emotion that has always accompanied the progress of modernity. In philosophy, the most direct expressions of this thought are found in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and the works of the Frankfurt School.<sup>19</sup> In particular, Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* attempted to come to terms with that horrendous events that made another side of modernity starkly visible: the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup> While some saw in the Holocaust a

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<sup>19</sup> To be sure, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and the Frankfurt School probably would not agree about much, except about the rift between appearance and reality that they all identify at the core of modernity. They all reacted in ways that feel strangely contemporary. Kierkegaard used pseudonyms to the point of becoming almost postmodern himself; Nietzsche signed his later letters with "Dionysos," "The Crucified," and "Kaiser Nietzsche," assuming many alter-egos; and the Frankfurt School theorists are united in uncovering hidden laws of anti-rational social construction, harboring a virtually postmodern suspicion.

<sup>20</sup> M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung [Dialectic of Enlightenment]* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2017/1947).

betrayal of the ideals of modernity, Horkheimer and Adorno reasoned the other way around: the Holocaust was the inevitable result of the forces of modernization. Its horror and irrationality were already inscribed in the emancipation that modernity promised. Modernity causes alienation, because its aberrant outgrowths and excesses turn humanity for a moment into “strangers on the earth.”

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* expresses a moment in which modernity as such becomes self-conscious. It is as if the modernist project turns around and looks at its own development, and then realizes with horror that the infinite highway to abundance and economic growth is in fact a tollway with an unaffordably high toll. For the first time, modernization becomes global, and threatens to destroy the planet. Our contemporary self-consciousness about our disastrous economic, social, and ecological impact on a planetary scale, the era of the Anthropocene, has its roots in this moment, in effect globalizing the Frankfurt School’s critique. Modernity itself becomes an object of study for the modernist mind. But unlike a Hegelian vision in which such a reflective moment overcomes prior limitations, from the standpoint of a megamind, the expected redemption never happens. Science fiction fantasies aside, there is no standpoint for humanity outside the biosphere or outside the pervasive cultural influence of postmodernity, and no merely technological solution is going to change those facts. Hence no solution in the teleological, modernist sense can be straightforwardly formulated in order to address and solve the current problems of humanity.

This thought has a painful sting because the Holocaust horrifically exemplified the fact that calculative, instrumental reason itself is not always reasonable. If anything, the dialectical opposite of calculative, instrumental reason—uncalculating, non-instrumental anti-rational passion—is never far away and appears as a madman pulling the strings of instrumental reason from behind the curtain. If anything, the Freudian unconscious is the real king of the castle, even when instrumental reason sits on the throne. This image—instrumental reason is problematically and obviously afloat in a sea of non-instrumental anti-rational passion—looms large in the work of post-World War II theorists like the Frankfurt School, and equally in French philosophers like Barthes, De Certeau, Derrida, Cixous, and Foucault. To be sure, they provided different (and sometimes mutually exclusive) accounts of how instrumental reason and non-instrumental unreason interacted, but the “universal highway to happiness” as postulated by modernity had become a road to hell paved with utopian intentions.

Art could do nothing more than capture this cultural current in images and artefacts. In a climate of relativism, escapism, and pessimism about instrumental

rationality and post-history, collage emerged as the *modus operandi*.<sup>21</sup> This was not merely because postmodernity is necessarily derivative, but also because a creeping and subterranean nihilism thrives in the cultural conditions just described. The only possible form of expression in such a climate is a crooked and ultimately cynical repetition of the past, and simultaneously a mode of *non-commitment*. No original work can be created, because the overarching coordinates for its interpretation have metamorphosed into a dimensionless universe of fragments and images. Worse still, the only further mode of development is a repetition of the repetition. This is a copy of a copy that has no original to start with, or an image of an image that is itself a juxtaposition without any context.

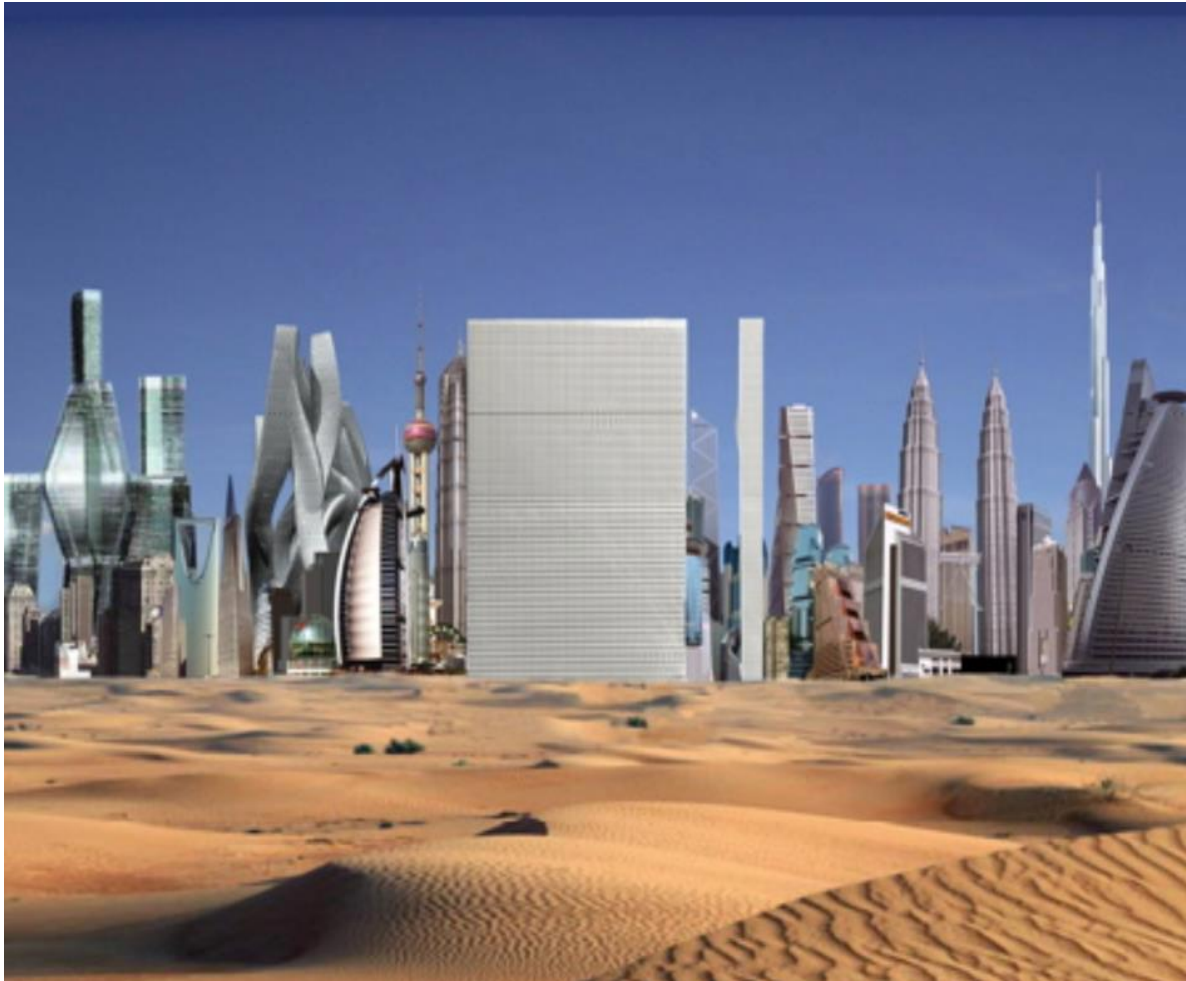
One of the best illustrations of this situation are states like Qatar or Dubai. In a desert that could in theory be endless, a mirage emerges: objects and towers that have been built with so much financial backing that no idea was too expensive or too exuberant. In a sudden reversal of Dostoevsky's character Smerdyakov ("if God is dead, then everything is permitted"), the very idea of the aesthetic becomes itself meaningless: if everything is permitted, nothing is universal and necessary, i.e., God, meta-narratives, essences, and the a priori are all dead. A locus of global financial forces turns into its very opposite: a sense of boring arbitrariness, a leisure landscape that is as ephemeral and flat as the image of an eternal and static Heaven in Christianity, a world that is not fit to inhabit. Baudrillard may be partially wrong here: it is not that reality completely disappears into a hyperreal without authenticity; instead, reality is desiccated, stripped of anything resembling content and meaning at all, while only an empty husk remains. Reality becomes hyperreal in the representations it creates of itself; yet, at the same time, it loses all meaning by this very proliferation. A sense of hollow arbitrariness pervades contemporary culture. Everything is permitted and possible, but nothing is meaningful or necessary. Over against sustainability, superfluousness is the credo of this age. Over and against the contradictions and complexities that excited Scott-Brown and Venturi, even variation becomes boring. In a sprawling multiplication of forms, shapes, and narratives, variation itself becomes a new status quo: stripped of its critical potential, it loses its attractiveness as an antidote to modernity, and what remains is just the banality of Atlantic City or a shopping mall—a badly produced fake that figures as an unconvincing idealization.

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<sup>21</sup> In early postmodern architectural theory, collage and pastiche techniques were explored as escape routes from or antidotes to monolithic, one-dimensional and totalizing modernistic urbanism. For example, to celebrate the plurality of vernacular styles and building traditions and to argue for an alternative for modernism, Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter wrote *Collage City*; and Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour wrote *Learning from Las Vegas*. See, e.g., C. Rowe and F. Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984); and R. Venturi, D. Scott-Brown, and S. Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977). And for a concise history of the genesis of these books, see H.F. Mallgrave and D. Goodman, *An Introduction to Architectural Theory. 1968 to the Present* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 18–25 and 45–46.



Meanwhile, high-rise mirages like Qatar and Dubai—



OMA, Dubai Renaissance, design competition entry 2006-2007

—are built and maintained by a virtual slave army of exploited workers from Third World countries. The whole functional set of premises that underlies the typology of towering, air-conditioned skyscrapers is a through-and-through modernist way of thinking driven to its extreme in a global market. This ruthless exploitation is beautifully marketed and clothed in undulating forms, but it could have just as well been rectangular glass-and-steel boxes from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The whole glittering edifice is made inhabitable by air-conditioning and slave-labor. Defying the local climatic conditions and devoid of any sense of realism or societal embedding, and yet also fully participating in the global flow of capital, Qatar and Dubai are symptoms rather than expressions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Like the tensions in the literary and philosophical works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such hyperreal mirages wait for an implosion, because the economic and societal forces on which they are dependent cannot sustain themselves.



While claiming that modernity had been overcome, postmodernity re-iterated a modern artistic practice in a decidedly different way. Like Dubai or Qatar, the form is different, the technology for design and construction is better, the marketing more effective, but the underlying, progress-driven logic is the same. The core premises of modernity are still active, but in a thoroughly transformed guise. Thus, postmodernity did not reject modernity: it is just its most recent, radicalized, and commercially diversified manifestation. The very insistence on difference and diversity, plurality, and relativism stem—despite claims to the contrary—not from an outright rejection of the monolithic vision that characterized 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernism, but from the appropriation of various philosophical post-structuralist ideas that received an unfaithful cultural translation and were seamlessly integrated into the capitalist process of production.<sup>22</sup>

Questions about textual interpretation in Derrida's works and questions about ontological difference in Deleuze's philosophical project were and are narrowly philosophical issues. Derrida's philosophical project was a natural development from linguistics, transcendental phenomenology, and existential phenomenology in the wake of Ferdinand de Saussure, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger. Deleuze's emphasis on difference as the basis of metaphysics was a natural outgrowth on earlier work done by Henri Bergson and Gilbert Simondon, as well as a radicalization of Spinoza's thought.

How such philosophical concerns became culturally embedded is quite a different matter. For instance, the Derridean idea that signs are always open for interpretation does not mean that there is no truth. However, in a commodity culture of fragmentation, this thought easily degenerates to: *my interpretation is my personal, customized truth*. Mass-media, digital corporations and politicians have been all-too-quick in seizing the enormous opportunities for manipulative marketing here. Just as the critical potential of poststructuralism has faded into "post-truth," so too the critical, contrastive force of surrealism quickly fades away in the skylines of Dubai or Abu Dhabi. The difference is that surrealism depends on its critical, distanced attitude to be effective as critique of ideology. Subjected to the logic of the free market, its visual language becomes a mere clamor, leaving meaningless husks of spatial residue. The unease that made surrealism a critical force is replaced by a mirage, a feel-good image of luxury that obfuscates all elements that could disturb one's personal pleasure. In such fictional universes, there is room for positive, consumer-oriented experiences only.

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<sup>22</sup> For further discussion of these points, see the three blog posts on *Against Professional Philosophy* cited in note 1 above.

This focus on consumerism can be understood against the developmental trajectory that leads from modernism to postmodernism. Postmodern culture rejects the idea of a single, unifying, universal, and necessary set of norms, whether they be metaphysical, epistemological, moral, social, or political. The field of reasons that tied lived experience in modern culture together was removed by those of a postmodern persuasion. The result of this removal is that every individual has to make sense of the world unaided by any set of norms in which he is rationally embedded. To be sure, modernist writers and artists had realized this already: the title of Zygmunt Bauman's 1996 work on post-certainty ethics *Alone Again* is therefore somewhat misleading. We are not alone *again*: we were alone *always already* (*immer schon*) since the Romantic era, in which subjectivity itself became the center of lived experience, and in particular moral and existential experience. When the existing field of norms, customs, and culture is taken away, there is no mediation between a given subject and the fragmented world she encounters. This gap, however, is quickly filled up by all manner of distractions and frantic attempts at bricolage.

And you wonder why Marx thought that "all that is solid melts into air"? In the globalized and postmodern world, our experience of reality itself is readily hijacked, ruthlessly marketed, tailored, customized, and adjusted to what we want to see, hear, experience and, above all, feel. We want real emotion, authenticity, and communal camaraderie or solidarity, so the hyperreal must be forced to provide it to us. As a consequence, tailored mini-universes that fleetingly satisfy the inexhaustible demand for real emotion, authenticity, and solidarity, are being created. Moreover, the creation of such mini-universes comes with a heavy cost:

Cultural production has been driven back inside the mind, within the monadic subject: it can no longer look directly out of its eyes at the real world for the referent but must, as in Plato's cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls. If there is any realism left here, it is a "realism" which springs from the shock of grasping that confinement and of realizing that, for whatever peculiar reasons, we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach.<sup>23</sup>

Again, we encounter the postmodern Tantalus: reality seems both hyperreal and also within reach, but when one tries to grasp it, one realizes in exasperation that it is in fact just out of reach. Reality itself noumenal and hidden, yet strangely present. It appears as a constant phantom that determines our very mode of being-in-the-world. And this mirage is made up of fragments that seduce and whisper: wealth is within reach, if only you invest cleverly; with a little more effort, you could be famous; all and only those who work hard, will become rich. The hyperreal itself

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<sup>23</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*.

has taken over the role of the “basic human desires” that were thought to reside in the Freudian unconscious. In 21<sup>st</sup>-century modernity, the Freudian unconscious has been externalized. Like an extended phenotype, our basic human desires take on the physical form of advertisements, seductive images, repeated patterns of conditioning, and instructions to grasp the luck and happiness that forever stay just out of reach.

This kind of visual and informational clamor is omnipresent in shopping malls, advertising, music videos, social media, or cinema. It is a surrealist cacophony of discordant stimuli or “unreserved representation,” often to the point of shamelessness and exhibitionism.<sup>24</sup> Not coincidentally, we see an increasing rise of self-commodification. The “feel-good” posts on Instagram, the cheerful Facebook messages, forced professionalism on LinkedIn, and the continuous rating and valuing of experiences points towards a new mode-of-being. No longer is there just a “free market out there,” but its mechanisms have pervaded the farthest corners of our personal identities. Not only has cultural production been driven back into the monadic subject—exactly the same can be said for economic production. In this case, the most surrealist example is that of a pregnant woman who provided taxi services via Lyft and gave birth while driving a client. Lyft presented her with its compliments afterwards and called it an “exciting story.”<sup>25</sup> She was merely an exemplary instrument for a predatory economic scheme that is in fact built on the knowledge that many people offering these services do not really have a choice. One should surely criticize an economic regime in which women have to work even if they are in the advanced stages of pregnancy.

The surrealist character of our contemporary reality aside, artistic surrealism possessed a certain method in its madness. Even if surrealist artworks do not justify their presence in logical and/or conceptual terms, they nevertheless captured a cultural tendency. Often enough, art succeeds in capturing such notions earlier than either the sciences or philosophy. In all its non-discursiveness and seeming incoherence, surrealism visualized the disintegration of metanarratives long before Lyotard wrote about it: it presaged the latter’s theory of the fragmentation of reality by roughly seventy years. In surrealism, the coordinates of reality are shifted, and “normality” becomes something alien and even threatening to the onlooker. One must self-consciously shift gears while looking at a surrealist painting: it demands a certain kind of intellectual flexibility. The usual framework of sensemaking is

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<sup>24</sup> J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998), p. 296.

<sup>25</sup> B. Menegus, “Lyft Thinks It’s ‘Exciting’ That a Driver Worked While Giving Birth,” *Gizmodo* (9 September 2016), available online at URL = <<https://gizmodo.com/lyft-thinks-its-exciting-that-a-driver-was-working-whil-1786970298>>.

twisted and subverted by the elements and the juxtaposition of the artwork, putting the spectator off-balance.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, embracing such imbalance was an artistic and later on a philosophical position. One could *choose* to subscribe to such a vision, or one could reject it in favor of a different view. Nowadays, what the surrealists painted has become an inescapable reality: fragmented, seemingly impossible to narrate from a single viewpoint, endlessly malleable and alterable. Our reality has irrevocably changed, and it has become more and more surrealistic by the day.

If we think of the representation of reality as a production process in the broadly Marxist sense (that is, as a network with intelligible relations between production equipment, laborer, equipment owner, and the economic superstructure) it follows that the raw substance of reality must be subjected to representational conversion procedures in order to turn it into a product. Marx saw very well how natural resources were converted into products, and that the surplus value of this process accumulated in capitalist pockets. However, notwithstanding the penetrating acumen of his analysis, he did not foresee that the representation of reality itself would become a prime resource. If representing reality is just such a resource, then it is subjected to processes of conversion in order to turn it into a product. The instruments for converting the representation of reality are *cinematographic* in nature.

### III. The Cinematography of Fragmentation

That our entire sensibility is nothing but the confused representation of things, which contains solely that which pertains to them in themselves but only under a heap of marks and partial representations that we can never consciously separate from one another, is therefore a falsification of the concept of sensibility and of appearance that renders the entire theory of them useless and empty.<sup>26</sup>

In section I, I pointed out that postmodern culture has led to a fragmentation of our experience of reality. It has done so in a variety of ways. First, it does so in a manner that can best be described as *cinematographic*; this type of fragmentation causes the second, which can be called an *attitudinal* fragmentation.

Cinematography consists in the “art and methods of film photography.”<sup>27</sup> It includes framing scenes, cutting from one scene to the next, constructing sequences,

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<sup>26</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), p. 168, A43/B61.

<sup>27</sup> “Cinematography,” *Cambridge Dictionary* (2019), available online at URL = <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cinematography>.

focusing the storyline on certain visual elements, etc. The very operation of cinematography makes storytelling through movies and images possible. Like a surrealist painter, the cinematographer has to rely on juxtaposition, the selection of elements, and a kind of bricolage for which previously recorded materials are being used. The very notion of assembly is inherent in any form of cinematography. My claim is that in postmodernity such techniques are applied not just to movies, but equally to our representation of reality itself, thereby structuring our access to it.

The cinematographic fragmentation of our experience of reality is an omnipresent phenomenon. Episodes of reality TV shows, news broadcasts, or items on websites set a certain sequence of events apart from everyday reality. Their editors carefully direct, cut, curate, and narrate these series and present them as well-circumscribed partitions of reality, or at least as truthful representations of real-world events. During such editorial procedures, a pre-selection is made as to what content to include and what to exclude, the order in which events are told is chosen, and the narrative emphasis is located in the overall storyline.

In this editorial process, the chronological sequence of events in spacetime is cut up into representational pieces that can be best described as “informational fragments.” They are fragmented not merely because they represent a selected portion of reality, but also because they are like Tangram pieces. Their very nature makes it possible to assemble them in various constellations that seem to carry equivalently plausible meanings.

Postmodern cultural theory had a point by insisting on the more-real-than-real character of simulacra. The Gulf War *was* a media phenomenon, and in claiming this, Jean Baudrillard was absolutely correct.<sup>28</sup> This does not imply that it did not take place as a real-world event. Instead, it *possibly* did not take place, and *might have been* an elaborate hoax. Nowadays, advanced software can manipulate moving images to such a degree that my facial features can be used to make it look as if I gave a speech in Parliament yesterday. The represented events of reality become a commodity, an impossible representation that can be manipulated at will. Chronology becomes a collage, a pastiche in which fact, fiction, art, past, present, wish, and nudge are seamlessly unified in formats that can be endlessly repeated and manipulated. No longer is propaganda a matter of clumsily constructed stories, but instead it assumes the guise of everyday events that can be broadcasted and repeated easily. It appears as a series of disconnected signs and representations. A characteristic example is The Helicon Building in The Hague (see the image displayed on p. 282). The silver volume inserted into the middle of the building is a

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<sup>28</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. P. Patton (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991).

reference to The Chrysler Building in New York City. The style is typical of architectural postmodernism: quoting, yet also ironically distancing.

The quote from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at the beginning of this section, criticizing the Leibniz-Wolff theory of perception, pertains to our cognitive capacities. Yet, in an environment where our cognition is so heavily mediated, Kant's methodological remark also has political relevance. The reduction of sensibility to an endless play of representations renders any theory about their functioning useless, because it reduces even the most precise and strenuous theorizing to "just another narrative." It is exactly this attitudinal disposition that makes cinematographic fragmentation so powerful. It is, however, a falsification of what human sensibility actually is, a forgery that attempts to undercut any legitimacy that an overarching theory of cognition or mental representation claims to provide. The postmodern approach is aimed at representing reality as nothing but a collection of signifiers, or signs.



"The Helicon Building," designed by Soeters Van Eldonk Architecten, urban masterplan Rob Krier, 1993–1999, The Hague, The Netherlands.

Nevertheless, the apparent fluidity of cinematographic fragments or frames makes representations in mass media or social media more than just signs, even when they are treated as such. While a major poststructuralist philosopher like Derrida focused on the linguistic dimension of informational fragmentation, the



needless fixation on signs restricted his analytical focus.<sup>29</sup> The informational fragments are decidedly more than mere carriers of information: they are malleable units that our imagination latches onto. They are endlessly transformable, given an effective cinematographic vehicle in which they appear. Targeted and careful mediation makes these fragments appear to be meaningful in their context. The recipient is not the interpreter of information any longer, but instead an agent in the assembly of one of the multiple meanings a fragment can carry. The fragment and the interpreting agent are taken up into an extended network in which neither has primacy over the other. Each fragment is fluid: depending on the context in which it appears, a given unit with a single set of semantic properties may be interpreted in ways that are incompatible, contradictory, or otherwise impossible.

This fluidity leads to strange events in virtual and physical space alike. Every fragment metamorphoses before our eyes, depending on the person appropriating it and the context in which it appears. Richard Dawkins was more correct than he could foresee when he coined the term “meme” to designate the basic unit of cultural transmission.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, like organisms, these packages of informational content morph, develop, and evolve depending on the virtual biotope which they inhabit. Not coincidentally, one can witness strange alliances in virtual and physical space. Feminist groups may protest alongside ultra-orthodox Muslim activists for the right to wear a burqa; otherwise peace-loving ecological conservationists protest alongside Neo-Nazis for the protection of an ancient forest; liberal citizens from Western Europe protest alongside Turkish nationalists against the American presence in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> Groups with diametrically opposed agendas latch onto a fragment of reality and interpret it through their preferred viewpoint, with seemingly no attention to the fact that their appropriation of a given fragment happens for reasons that are mutually exclusive when compared to those of their compatriots.

In architecture and urbanism, these strange paradoxes exist physically side by side and over a prolonged period of time, accumulating like the debris of the past. Shopping malls that flirt with vernacular architecture exist alongside modular, glass-and-steel office buildings that would have not been out of place in the high modernism of the 1960s.<sup>32</sup> Fueled by global capital, so-called “starchitecture” buildings determine the skylines of important cities. In-between, bottom-up

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<sup>29</sup> Most notably in his early works *Voice and Phenomenon*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Of Grammatology*, all published in 1967.

<sup>30</sup> R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 189–201.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., G. Meotti, “Europe’s Barely Clad Feminists Partner with Burqa-Wearing Islamists,” *Israel National News* (4 September 2019), available online at URL = <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/24402>.

<sup>32</sup> Jencks, “What Then is Post-Modernism?”

initiatives claim to be “spaces of resistance,” “temporary autonomous zones,” or “heterotopias,” that refuse to participate in global capitalism and the neoliberal State.<sup>33</sup> High-end waterfronts and parks grace the neighborhoods of the affluent, claiming to unite citizens in open, inclusive spaces. Yet, the increasing presence of surveillance techniques in these public spaces deliberately keeps out those who do not fit the picture.<sup>34</sup> Alongside postmodern architecture, a neomodern architecture has developed, as has a whole range of building projects that claim to transcend the limitations of these parallel modernities by focusing on community values and co-creation. In the meantime, technology firms and governments alike look to emerging technology to guarantee a safe, inclusive, and ecological urban Paradise.<sup>35</sup> In a feat of social engineering that Robert Moses could only dream of, postmodern culture has succeeded in utilizing the modernist mindset while claiming to have overcome it.

The emergence of digital technology for designing buildings and controlling behavior has turned the environment itself into an extension of mass media, social media, and surveillance tactics. The premise that organizational tools and platforms like contemporary social media are useful for realizing an urban Paradise is potentially true; but the omission that contemporary surveillance technology, mass media, or social media are not neutral vehicles for social organization turns it immediately into a glib triviality. This very omission covers up the important question that Plato already introduced in *The Republic*: who will be the guardians that protect this Paradise-to-be, and how will they be selected?

In a culture of fragmentation, social media and mass media function like an amplifier of *all* thoughts. Often, they force users to condense their thoughts in the extreme (in the case of Twitter or Facebook) or to reduce them to images (in the case of Instagram). Surveillance footage is the supreme example of a fragment: only the transgression is televised, often from a single viewpoint (the hidden God’s-eye-view of the camera) without any context or explanation. The result is a cacophony of voices, images, half-formed opinions, idealized representations, and textual snippets. Public space is self-evidently not a Rawlsian “marketplace of ideas” where

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<sup>33</sup> For an example of this line of thinking about urban space, see F. Miazzo and T. Kee (eds.) *We Own the City: Enabling Community Practice in Architecture and Urban Planning* (trancity\*valiz 2014).

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., D. Jimison and Y.J. Paek, “An Intentional Failure for the Near Future: Too Smart City,” in M. Shepard (ed.) *Sentient City: Ubiquitous Computing, Architecture and the Future of Urban Space* (New York: The Architectural League/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 110–126.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., M. Champagne, “Where the Image Flows: How Sidewalk Labs’ Public Relations Came to Dominate Journalism,” *Failed Architecture* (7 October 2019), available online at URL = <https://failedarchitecture.com/where-the-image-flows-how-sidewalk-labs-public-relations-came-to-dominate-journalism/?fbclid=IwAR0e186UosWJbl-h3B6StH5vuf9f4rdobmj6Nx7eqdVNdfOrUSWlsFaOb-w>.

we argue reasonably and rationally about political measures or preferences, about neutral topics, or about the best alternative for solving a problem.

The fragmentation of reality undermines the very idea of an *agora* as a level playing field. It turns out that the uneven playing field is not the only problem, but equally the problem is the kind of language games that are being played on it. Virtual protests, vitriolic Twitter exchanges, voting actions that run via talk shows (vote for candidate X or Y), and the careful selections of footage, are all orchestrated and pre-structured by media that function like cinematographic instruments, continuously cutting, pasting, editing, overlaying contents, and presenting choices that are merely “formal” in the Marxian sense. According to Marx’s distinction, they are merely *formal* (or phoney) instead of *real* (or genuine) because the possibilities themselves have already been preselected by others. Such choices artificially represent the moment of choice, and they do so in a way that turns them immediately into their opposite. By limiting the possibilities for making a real choice, they highlight to what degree the presented options are preselected and above all insincere.

Moreover, the informational fragments of reality from which we choose and that are cobbled or stitched together are themselves idealizations. They are either a copy with an idealized original, or an idealized past:

In fact the heritage museum, such as the one at Beamish in the north-east of England, epitomizes the postmodern process whereby a past is nostalgically recreated as a form of substitute reality. Ex-miners are employed to inform the rest of us about mining in a time in which they did not live, while the need for ‘real’ mining has all but disappeared. We pay our money and are entertained by consuming second-hand experiences which once formed the basis of social life. To a significant extent we have become tourists in our own cultures.<sup>36</sup>

Mass media functions analogously to the heritage museum. Physically, one is a tourist in one’s own culture; virtually, one becomes a tourist in one’s own head. The idealized media presence of on-line culture deals in images that are substitutes depicting substitutes. The sad fact that young people photograph themselves with an empty Starbucks cup, because the image is more important than reality, is a supercharged simulacrum that not even Baudrillard could imagine. Reality is *substituted* by images, idealizations, experiences, fragments, and further substitutions. For the spectator, these images present formal or phoney choices: we can choose to like them, dislike them, or ignore them, but in reality, such images are only cut-out and idealized portions of someone else’s lives. They omit as much as or

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<sup>36</sup> N. Watson, “Postmodernism and Lifestyles (Or: You Are What You Buy),” in S. Sim. (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 53–64, at p. 55

even more than they tell. Any meaningful action about or towards such pictures simply cannot be carried out, because too much is omitted. Their fragmentary, idealized and incomplete nature makes it impossible to meaningfully engage with them. Flashy images of success or a feel-good moment spur only a momentarily enthusiasm that is regulated by the modes of expression of social media.

Given the inherently artificial character of such idealization, social media excite a kind of engagement that rarely lasts. They encourage superficiality over prolonged commitment; the heat of the moment over reflection; incessant shouting over rational arguing; and the demand for *instant gratification* over the complexities of realizing sustainable, institutional, and structural changes. The actions inspired by social media emerge as the total sum of fragmented, individual viewpoints that lack a real collective, trans-individual structure. The shared camaraderie, solidarity, or understanding within a group (e.g., Marx's idea of "class") is lacking in the virtual spaces of social media. The cinematographic fragmentation of reality results in a lack of belonging. It presents individual viewpoints as a mass of subjective experiences not united by any overarching structure. Or rather: the mass of subjective viewpoints is brought together by a technological structure that presents itself as a neutral platform but is nevertheless structuring, cutting and cinematographically dividing and fragmenting reality. The platform stratifies, segments, fragments, and structures the space, literally functioning as a script for behavior.<sup>37</sup> Like speed bumps, security gates, traffic lights, and floor lining, the digital platform nudges or outright coerces users into predefined patterns and sequences.<sup>38</sup> It creates a choreography of behavior that supports the structuring system — again, nothing but a series of formal or phoney choices.

It should also be pointed out that contemporary mass media and social media are *themselves* products. And they are maintained and refined by corporations for whom users are also themselves products. Everything is commodified. All our clicks, likes, preferences, and choices are meticulously logged, analyzed, dissected, and forcefully yet manipulatively directed back at us in the form of "customized advertisements" or targeted talk shows. This is their business model for colonizing behavior.

If Marx could witness the operation of contemporary social media, he would be awestruck by its seamless efficiency, its almost-too-obvious integration with everyday life and its ceaseless, global, 24/7 production cycle. Because — and this is

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<sup>37</sup> B. Latour, "Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts," in W.E. Bijker and J. Law (eds.) *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 245–258.

<sup>38</sup> For a classic study of nudging, see R.H. Thaler and C.R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Wealth, Health and Happiness* (London/New York: Penguin 2009).

something Marx would have instantly recognized — the virtual environment of social media is *both* the means of production *and also* the production process itself. As Benjamin Fong has emphasized: it is the expression of The Vampire Castle *and* the Castle itself.<sup>39</sup> Without the plethora of expressions and its global, all-encompassing infrastructure, the mega-network of social media does not exist. Each individual viewpoint is materialized in new material for the platform to use and also dematerialized in a cloud analysis that can be used for marketing purposes. The Cambridge Analytica scandal showed just how deeply the lives of users are enmeshed in technological spider webs. Our everyday experiences create the substance for a hyperreal that functions on its reverse side as a giant abstraction machine. Our choices become products, our preferences become datasets, our identities become clouds of former decisions, all of them stored in a digital format that can be analyzed, dissected and sold. Our abstracted and dematerialized past reflects a kind of distorted image of ourselves back at us, often in the form of tailored marketing. The strange simultaneity of materialization and dematerialization is almost literally a Hegelian paradox: two opposites that depend on each for their very existence, and that continuously need to reinforce and cancel each other.

In an extreme case of such dematerializing reduction, American drone operators in the Middle East were required to target individuals who were labeled “terrorists,” and obediently directed their killer drones at their unsuspecting victims. In a single stroke, the identity of a person is reduced to a label for a system that decides whether he should live or die. The criteria used to single out individuals are as much the result of extrapolation of incomplete data, as they are of heavily classified undercover operations. For the killing system, persons are dissolved into mere datapoints and labels in a decimation machine, the reach of which is being kept from us. Consider, for example, this telling observation by the operator of a killer drone:

[T]he existential sensation of killing someone by manipulating a computer joystick has left a deep and lasting impression on him. “Ever step on ants and never give it another thought? That’s what you are made to think of the targets — as just black blobs on a screen. You start to do these psychological gymnastics to make it easier to do what you have to do — they deserved it, they chose their side. You had to kill part of your conscience to keep doing your job every day — and ignore those voices telling you this wasn’t right.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> B.Y. Fong, “Log Off,” *Jacobin* (29 November 2018), available online at URL = <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/11/log-off-facebook-twitter-social-media-addiction>.

<sup>40</sup> E. Pilkington, “Life as a Drone Operator: ‘Ever Step on Ants and Never Give It Another Thought?’,” *The Guardian* (19 November 2015), available online at URL = <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/18/life-as-a-drone-pilot-creech-air-force-base-nevada>; and see also P. Chatterjee, “American Drone Operators are Quitting in Record Numbers.”

The relations between laborer and production equipment are fundamental if we want to understand the laborer's predicament. And exactly the same goes for the relation between the drone operator, his killing machine, and the victim. The killing has to be justified in the same instrumental terms as those that are used to identify the next victim. The labor relation of the drone operator is one which determines his mode-of-being. In less extreme cases, the social media infrastructure ceaselessly nudges, manipulates, and controls its users. Moreover, the entire enterprise is designed in such a way that it is addictive, chaining the laborers to their equipment.

The relations that are forged between laborer and his means of subsistence are controlled by those who possess the means of production and therefore determine its mode of producing. Identifying this link enables us to think of the mode of production as a non-neutral phenomenon. The Vampire Castle is not a platform, it is a mode of subsistence for a system that continuously creates its own content and production equipment. Users are for these systems not customers or collaborators—they are the substance required for the system to sustain itself and improve its grip on its primary resource.

Imagine it as a prison that is willingly and gladly built by the prisoners themselves. They do not know that they are building their own prison, and even if they were to realize this fact, they would happily ignore any warnings and continue constructing it. Kant aptly described this attitude as a *self-incurred immaturity*.<sup>41</sup> Media platforms centered on instant gratification do not foster an attitude in which discipline and concentration are valued, let alone the cultivation of detachment to take some distance from its production process. Stunting personal growth in this manner, these technological tools encourage and manipulate their users to stay morally and rationally immature. The continuous stream of new materials requires no growing up, no reflection, and no shortage of novelty.

Being controlled in this way turns immediately into its exact opposite: it is a form of "controlled being." It is not merely that we cannot do this or that; cannot say this or that; or that we are not allowed to go here or there. No, our very mode-of-being is actively controlled, curtailed, observed, monitored, stunted, deformed, and when deemed necessary, corrected and re-directed.<sup>42</sup>

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*The Nation* (5 March 2015), available online at URL = <<https://www.thenation.com/article/american-drone-operators-are-quitting-record-numbers/>>.

<sup>41</sup> I. Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," in I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. M.J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 15–22, at p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> M. Foley, *The Age of Absurdity: Why Modern Life Makes It Hard to be Happy* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2010), p. 97.



The initial worry of poststructuralist thinkers was that the postmodern subject was deregulated. She was not embedded in or defined by an overarching social or institutional field. Traditional cornerstones of the social order disappeared, while identities became active, fluid constructions instead of relatively fixed memberships in a social class. Combined with the postmodern suspicion regarding grand narratives, the initial worry was that the postmodern subject would be lost in a sea of information, while at the same time she was expected to take charge of the construction of her preferences, identity, and role in society.

Nowadays, we can see that this worry is only the first half of the problem. The problem is not just that the postmodern subject is deregulated, fragmented, or distorted. The other half of the problem is how she is re-regulated. Surveillance, the collection of data, nudging, attentional fragmentation, and “controlled being” are new forms of stratifying, regulating, and ordering the new subject. This leads to a contradictory set of demands or moral imperatives. One is compelled to take active charge of one’s career; yet, the free market continually ranks and evaluates one’s fitness for the job market in terms of criteria that one does not know. The injunction is to enjoy life in the liberal West; yet, the implicit demands posed by peer pressure and marketing cause people to feel guilty about this very enjoyment. In a vicious cycle of transgression and atonement, consumer culture relies on the non-stop manipulation of consumers. The major resources of late capitalism are the emotions and inner lives of consumers—fragmented, postmodern subjects that are carefully regulated, monitored, directed and kept in line. The injunction to enjoy and express oneself spontaneously, is coupled with a carefully designed superstructure of pressure, nudges, and reinforced behavior to determine what an “accepted expression” looks like. The fact that these two imperatives are contradictory leads to an internal split in one’s personality. One must fragment oneself in order to make sense of one’s life. And yet, it is this very fragmentation that prevents any sensemaking at all. This situation is perfectly expressed in the 2008 song “They Say” by *Scars on Broadway*:

There’s a prison that’s gone  
But the fear lives on  
I watched you walking on the dotted line  
Maybe you don’t see what’s in front of me  
Maybe you won’t stand the test of time

The song refers to the closing of the Guantanamo Bay prison, but it describes the effect that the prison has: it stands for a political order that bypasses regulations, and that functions by drawing dotted lines instead of issuing direct orders. Here, the atmosphere of suspicion and implicit expectations that characterizes postmodernity and the post-9/11 world in particular are condensed into a few lines. We do not

know what is standing behind the anonymous authority, whether it be our peers, social media, or a political system. And we cannot be sure that it will turn out well. This continuous tiptoeing cannot but fragment one's self-image.

This immersive servitude is genuinely new, especially since the mechanisms responsible for the control (dopamine production to facilitate addiction, tricks to play on personal guilt or the feeling of missing out, and the subtly manipulative idea of being "in on the joke") have become our favorite playthings that we won't give up. It fundamentally alters the way in which we see and experience our everyday lives. Our immaturity is self-incurred because we refuse to discard the toys that enslave us. Moreover, this type of enslavement is not without serious consequences for our cognitive and practical capacities.<sup>43</sup>

Confined to such enslavement, it is hard to focus on a single topic, to maintain a dialogue, and indeed to discriminate between fact and fiction. The endless presence of mass media and social media deteriorates this situation. Currently, we perceive reality as disjointed, turning the core theoretical tenet of postmodernity into a self-fulfilling prophecy. This has deep consequences for our ability to act as a collective, especially for our capacity to realize lasting political changes. By means of a perfected "divide and conquer" strategy, the potential for sustainable political change is eroded. The assault on concentration has turned it into a rarity: our public spaces and private spaces are permeated with an oppressive demand for immediate action and an equally oppressive presence of distractions. The more fragmented, disjointed, and rich in "content," the better.<sup>44</sup> The culture of gratification demands *change now* but fails, because it cannot work up the necessary concentration and political longevity to realize an enduring political vision beyond the immediate confines of the present.

The lack of political strength and the ubiquity of divided attention make postmodern culture an easy target for capitalist marketing and divisive political strategies: the endless proliferation of sexualities, cultural backgrounds, political universes, language games, and narratives can be marketed and controlled without too much effort. They are presented as choices, decisions that can be made individually and that can be cobbled together into self-absorbed personal universes. No wonder then, that massive multinationals like Shell, Google, or Exxon Mobil advertise their "diversity."

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<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Foley, *The Age of Absurdity*, pp. 136–137.

<sup>44</sup> It is telling that labels like "creatives," "content creators," etc., are completely stripped of any reference to a dedicated discipline or type of content. Everything is simply "content" that is "created". In other words: it's just an amorphous mass of information to which a host of cinematographic editing tools can be applied.

Like so many products in the contemporary society of the spectacle, the proliferation of identities and sexual/ethnic/lifestyle/political minorities offers endless marketing possibilities for catering for and appealing to various groups. Some of these groups have goals and aims that are completely incompatible. For example, a company like Shell can appeal to environmentalists, capitalists, greedy businessmen, and human rights campaigners all at the same time. For every group is a product, cinematographically customized for one's sensibilities and preferences. Each of us is forcibly turned into a bricoleur, constructing our own lives and viewpoints from an ever-larger heap of ideological debris. So, as another example, right-wing politicians in the US can appeal to extreme-right activists, disenfranchised blue collar workers, conservative Christians, Libertarians, and the NRA. No matter the differences between these groups, they all can be appeased by a fragmented and disjointed narrative that is strangely ephemeral. Yet, these narratives are distributed via media that promise the opposite of division: they advertise with global connectivity and belonging to a community of like-minded people.

When social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn advertise with catch-all terms like "visibility," "connections," and "shared understanding," they promise far more than they can deliver. Human understanding did not flourish because of social media. Nor has hatred diminished since their widespread adoption by people across different cultures. The communal dimension of collective action that we can find in, for example, early socialism, is by and large missing in virtual space. Shared collective understanding, camaraderie, and solidarity are replaced by a surface, skin-deep representation of lasting political change. The collective emotion felt by, for instance, protesters against a given cause is televised, streamed, Twittered, Instagramed, and distributed in a series of fragments that have an emotive value, but lack political content.

Yet, these fragments are effective informational pieces that can be relentlessly copied, pasted, and transformed in a marketing campaign. The supreme example is here is a video of Sacha Baron Cohen calling Facebook the "largest propaganda machine in history." This video was widely shared via social media, including Facebook.<sup>45</sup> And while an all-too-glib response would be that this precisely proves how open and democratic social media *really* are, it is clear that in the postmodern universe, there is no outside. Derrida's famous quip "there is no outside-text" can be effortlessly extended to "there is no outside-media." Even the condemnation of social media is absorbed into its productive apparatus, generating likes, clicks and supporting the system that is being criticized for its all-encompassing presence.

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<sup>45</sup> S.B. Cohen, "Read Sacha Baron Cohen's Scathing Attack on Facebook in Full: 'Greatest Propaganda Machine in History'," *The Guardian* (22 November 2019), available online at URL = <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/22/sacha-baron-cohen-facebook-propaganda>.

The very idea of a Marxian critique in the traditional sense under such cultural circumstances appears ridiculous, as its practice crucially depends on the notion of an “outside space” from which contemporary culture can be observed. In postmodern culture, such a space is at best a chimera, a mythical space that exists just over the horizon; or worse, it is a space that pretends to be *really* outside the system but that is nevertheless contained by it. The postmodern Tantalus cannot attain freedom but is at the same time condemned to be free. One is as it were sentenced to pretend that the formal choices offered through the fragmented reality are *real* choices, and that participating in the fragmented reality is *actually* exercising one’s autonomy.

As contemporary social and mass media fragmentize our reality, they shatter our commitments, our capacity for prolonged attention, and our consequently our capabilities for solidarity, slowly obliterating the realization that we can organize ourselves without the subtle interference of social media tech giants. Benjamin Fong correctly describes this feature of social media as the “atomizing of individuals.”<sup>46</sup> Each of us has a tailored universe, furnished to one’s—carefully manipulated—preferences, but we start to lose the collective dimension necessary for lasting, sustainable, and reasonable political change. That is not to say that people have completely lost the capacity to organize themselves. One should stay clear of such a deterministic, all-out skeptical conclusion. Individual autonomy is not *removed* by the politics of fragmentation, but its development is *hindered* and *stunted*. The “self-incurred immaturity” of contemporary society is a direct consequence of this stunted growth, resulting in an inability to escape this state of immaturity.

Therefore, Fong’s point must be taken to its final conclusion in order to describe our predicament fully. Not only are individuals atomized through social media. Individuality *itself* is atomized, fragmented into pieces of reality. We cannot be of one mind any longer, because our minds are torn apart through an extreme fragmentation of our attention. Our attitudinal disposition towards reality is fragmentized in a continuous cinematography. The postmodern suspicion of “grand narratives” is not a theoretical choice now: it is the inevitable outcome of a process of existential fragmentation and loss of coherence. In a world controlled through touchscreens and buttons, a grand narrative cannot but appear like an absurdity. What melts into air through the mediation of social media is our grasp on reality.

This, then, is *attitudinal fragmentation*. As we have seen, cultural production, when driven back into the monadic subject leads to a mode-of-being that is increasingly subjected to control, distraction, surveillance and manipulation. If our cognitive capacities are stunted and diminished, and reality itself becomes a

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<sup>46</sup> Fong, “Log Off.”

resource that is directed at us and projected on us, this cannot but have political consequences. Regulative ideals implicit in marketing, surveillance, community guidelines, and self-commodification are not neutral. In a globalized and post-9/11 world, these technologies are quickly turning into political categories.

#### **IV. The Politics of Fragmentation**

Through I don't know what Möbius effect, representation itself has also turned in on itself, and the whole logical universe of the political is dissolved at the same time, ceding its place to a transfinite universe of simulation, where from the beginning no one is represented nor representative of anything anymore, where all that is accumulated is deaccumulated at the same time, where even the axiological, directive, and salvageable phantasm of power has disappeared.<sup>47</sup>

Recapping the argument so far, we can say that postmodern culture has encouraged the creation of personal bubbles. These tailored universes are customizable for everyone's individual preferences. Via screens, subscriptions, personalized advertisements, tablets, streaming services, notifications and smartphones, the contents of these universes become entrenched in our worldview as they permeate and mediate our access to reality. As commercial products, they exert an undeniable influence on their users, leading to an attitudinal fragmentation. They provide substitute access to a hyperreality that becomes itself a substitute for an ephemeral and fleeting "authenticity" that seems to veer out of reach as soon as one attempts to grasp it.

The creation of bubbles does not occur only on a personal level. Entire political universes are conjured out of thin air. A quick survey around the globe proves the point: emerging nationalist parties on the European continent demand a return to a political universe that is protectionist and conservative; hardline Brexiteers hanker after a time when the British Empire ruled the world and controlled trade relations; nationalism in the US has promoted a protective *Pax Americana* view backed by Evangelicals who strive to realize a Christian political universe; China has made no secret of its expansionist agenda, driven by a strict party policy to maintain a single, state-authored identity; and Russia flirts with the idea of Novorussia—a new nation with a single identity centered around "traditional values. Sunni and Shiite groups in the Middle East each lay claim to a complete political universe in which the other party does not exist at all. And the terrorist organization ISIS has conjured up the physical version of a new political

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<sup>47</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, P. 152.

universe, centered around the idea of a Caliphate that would envelop the world and erase all differences in a single religious vision.

Such bubbles are fiercely protected, their inhabitants ferociously combative and single-minded. This feature alone is worth some reflection: in a world that is cinematographically fragmented, political and ideological universes provide “safe spaces.” They conjure up a world in which one can be authentically single-minded again. In such bubbles, one can ignore all historical evidence and adhere to a fascist vision of the world; one can disregard all other religious affiliations and view them as mere heathens; or one can steadfastly believe in a flat Earth, even despite all evidence to the contrary. The simultaneous absence *and* caricaturizing of the “Other” characterizes these political universes. Such places provide a new fragmentation of reality while at the same time claiming to overcome it. In a fluid reality, they are driven by the easy-to-excite group-think, obsessive fears, and insider vs. outsider frames of reference. One important case-in-point here is the emergence of neofascism, a political orientation long thought dead, buried or at least marginalized. However, in a postmodern, connected, globalized, and fragmented world, it thrives. It emerges as a vaguely familiar but dislocated political vision, yet it has adapted to a new and fragmented world.

The clash between fascism and postmodernity is all the more striking because fascism is characterized by its deeply reactionary cultural narrative. An idealized version of the past is glorified, and the present must be adjusted to conform to it. Fascism emphasizes the “organic” nature of society exactly for this reason: the social field is a single multi-celled organism, each domain of which is intimately connected with adjacent ones. In this sense, fascism promises an identity-driven antidote to the alienation, isolation, and estrangement of modernity. It does so by emulating a past in which everyone knows everyone, communal structures prevent loneliness, social networks provide belonging, and social problems are treated like illnesses or parasites that disturb the mythic-political universe.

This idealized past is then heralded as an antidote for all the evils of the modern age, in particular the feeling of alienation or isolation. The idea that individuals are weakened by both the loneliness and comfort of modernity is propagated. Individual prowess and purposive suffering in the service of a paternal nation-state-community is praised and encouraged, and a kind of countercultural heroism is glorified. Fascism conjures up a new political universe in which postmodern fragmentation did not take place at all. The paradox is that its renewed emergence of the world-stage is exactly a consequence of the fragmentation of which it pretends that it did not take place. To top it off, the technological means with which fascism promotes its politics thrives on the fragmentation it condemns. In a postmodern gesture that is hard to beat, fascism sells itself by denying that it is



fascism, even while it is undeniably true that facsism could emerge only under the very cultural conditions it publicly criticizes and claims to overthrow.

In an even stranger reversal, the identity-driven promise of deeply rooted, personal connection and authenticity that fascism propagates sounds eerily like the overtly optimistic promises of tech-giants. The world will be connected; people can become part of a community that transcends their individuality; one can find others that share one's values and identity; the future is communal; participation is mandatory; and our social media platform allows for expressing your views if only you adhere to the guidelines. Fascism itself dissolves to the level of the everyday (and even a product) in the universe of fragmentation.

And here we can see just how the cinematographic culture of postmodernity has enabled the emergence of a neo-fascism that is strangely *like and unlike* its historical predecessors: it draws heavily on postmodernity's intellectual undercurrents of suspicion and continuous fragmentation; yet its political universe is deeply static and reactionary. These two mutually exclusive approaches to the world (fluid versus static) happily co-exist and reinforce each other. No matter their incompatibility, they create a new mode of politics that combines the omnipresence and fluidity of postmodern culture with the hierarchic and stratified power structure of a fascist state. The result of this synthesis is not a monolithic, authoritarian dictatorship, but a distributed, surveillance architecture of control.

The foundation of its political strategy is the effective utilization of fluidity. What was truth yesterday is "disputed" or "fake news" now. Allegations that may seem reasonable are "false" or "unfounded." Blatant lies are written off as "miscommunications." All these fragmented messages are framed, televised, streamed, endlessly discussed by panels, repeated and cobbled together in various constellations. The cinematographic fluidity of the present is a potent tool for mass manipulation. It is also a great asset in whipping up artificial divides and supercharging existing prejudices.

The cinematography is easily discernible: a piece of information (let's say an outright lie or an obvious half-truth) is televised in a given context—say, in a press conference or a similar public forum with a degree of respectability. Once the lie or half-truth is discovered to be false or at least highly misleading, it evolves from information into a fragment in an economy of fragments. Even a blatant lie can be a piece of information—and this point is brilliantly emphasized in Orwell's *1984*—it's just that the information is false. The informational fragment on the other hand is infinitely malleable. It has no definitive shape, and as such can be shaped by anyone and fitted into every context.

The postmodern rejection of any overarching field of reason is no longer just an epistemological position, but instead a political reality. The rejection of the modernist engineer has delivered each of us in the hands of the bricoleur. Mass media provided conspiracy theorists, anti-vaxxers, and religious fanatics alike with communicative platforms to showcase ideas that were originally beyond mainstream credibility. However, their presence in the “arena of debate” appears to legitimize their points of view. The fluidity of the present is characterized by its refusal to take on a solid form, to crystallize into something tangible or even coherent. The ever-changing shape of our cognitive landscape coats yesterday over with the presence of a forced forgetfulness. The visual representation of the “swipe” on a touchscreen is the postmodern visual *par excellence*: any vertical hierarchy is gone, and the center of attention can be swept away to the left or right at any moment. It appears as optional and replaceable, expendable even. If reality does not deliver what is desired, it can be replaced by a more convenient picture. Reality itself becomes an image, a two-dimensional representation that can be manipulated, cut, switched off, transported, uploaded, downloaded, and infinitely copied.

If reality itself appears as non-fundamental or optional, it is no wonder that cinematographic fragmentation becomes a lethal political tool. The fact that political elites can harness a targeted cinematography and that citizens seem to tolerate it only vindicates its power. This is not to say that societal unrest and dissent have disappeared in a media-controlled landscape of distractions and fragments. Due to attitudinal fragmentation, this uneasiness simply refuses to crystallize into something lasting and even coherent. A part of the problem here can be traced back to the disintegration of collective power. No longer is State power concentrated in the hands of a single person or social institution. It is distributed according to a different principle. What Baudrillard called “the axiological, directive, and salvageable phantasm of power” is not salvageable anymore. One cannot aim one’s arrows against a political power that appears as spectral, fragmentary and fluid.

This is why Nazi Germany and the former Soviet Union are such favorite but ultimately misleading examples of dictatorships in popular culture: they represent clear, well-circumscribed opponents. They are paradigmatic villains represented by monolithic institutions to which clear and above all easy, seemingly morally justified answers are possible. But the jumble of distributed terrorist networks, informational fragmentation, untouchable politicians, shadowy oligarchs, and radicalized individuals represents a different type of enemy. They are fluid, swarm-like, and flexible, yet not unorganized. The same characteristic can be discerned *vis á vis* our current political order: it appears more and more as a cloud of spectral figures that are untouchable and that appear only fragmentary and temporarily on screens, social media channels, and in our minds. Yet, the political means of citizens are still traditional (at least in representative democracies), giving political elites the upper

hand in every discussion, because they do not behave according to the rules they claim to uphold. Nor do these rules apply when attempts are made to hold them accountable.

Long-standing social institutions like Congress, Senate, Parliament, Courthouse, or Church are becoming more and more symbols of a bypassed order. They reflect the bourgeois and welfare societies that arose respectively during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and after World War II. However, in the postmodern world, they have been replaced by *events*. A megachurch deals in organizing emotional and sweeping events; political debates are commercial, rash and televised events that seamlessly blend in with the non-stop entertainment culture. Authority has become performance: a politician is not chosen for his viewpoints, but for his performance in the society of fragmentation; the content of his message is not what makes it effective, but its uptake in the virtual realm of social media does. A topic that is “trending” or goes “viral” has the upper hand over any kind of reasoned response.

The symbolic language of words and images used by the traditional (or more broadly modern) societal order is appropriated and put to a new use, one in which these once-trusted symbols become performative and visual fragments. The politics of fragmentation disrupt the old societal order but continue to utilize its symbols as a legitimizing resource. The strategy here is to appeal to the legitimacy connected to these symbols. In their new application, however, it is obvious that their re-appropriation is a forgery, an artificial construction formed through bricolage. The fragmented hyperreal is parasitic on the images and symbols of the past. It puts them to a use for which they were not intended and utilizes them in an economy of images that is alien to them. As aesthetic strategy, this need not necessarily be problematic. As political strategy, it results in the creation of political universes that are overly simplistic, reactionary, and close-minded—and above all, obvious forgeries in search of legitimacy.

What is so unsettling in this situation is that the traditional understanding of dignitarian democracy, truth, and integrity is treated as if it will vanish overnight because it is irrelevant in the current order of things. In a political reality that is thoroughly fragmented, seemingly discordant elements and events appear together in a surrealistic tapestry. In a world built of fragments, the institutions of the past are only useful as nostalgic symbols, invoked when a sense of weight and tradition is required.

This is why the return to Statist nationalism is a postmodern gesture, closely correlated to the re-emergence of neo-fascism. In both cases, the symbols of a long-lost world are invoked to create a more-real-than-real political universe in which the problems of the present are conveniently conjured away. The ultimate fluidity is

reflected in the phenomenon of globalization: it connects the entire world population, and all of its cultures, customs, conflicts and viewpoints. Against this image of maddening complexity and plurality, the populist political response is to “keep things simple” by arbitrarily cutting out a convenient portion of reality. Whether one chooses to discriminate between one’s nation and the rest of the world, or between white and colored people matters little: the gesture is one of willfully looking away in the face of the hyperreal world—it is better to have *gratification now* than to work through the effort of having to face a traumatically fragmented reality.

The problem here is not just the creation of an “Other,” but its negative mirror image: the world is too complex and a new universe—a simpler one, preferably—is needed to impose a sense upon reality. The political universe creates not only an “Other,” but necessarily also an “Us.” And in a world that is already fragmented, such a strategy yields only heavily distorted images that defy any fixed interpretation. The old critique of ideology in the age of Nazism or Communism did at least have the advantage that it had to deal with clumsy narratives and all-too-blatant lies. In such a situation, it was clear that State ideologies were artificial constructions.<sup>48</sup> However, the fragmented images let loose on citizens in contemporary media culture are not capable of—and not intended to—cohere into something intelligible or articulable at all.

This highlights a core characteristic of the informational fragment: it is a *distraction*, a *commercial* or a simplistic *ideological image* that depicts a reality that is ridiculously simplified, or all-in-one, one-stop shopping. Often, it is a distraction that doubles as a commercial that doubles as an ideological representation. A commercial may distract one from thinking about one’s predicament, especially if it is often repeated or entertaining; yet, it is also an ideological representation, because it addresses one as a consumer, or as the stereotypical middle-age male, or as an empowered businesswoman. The fact that one is pressed into a predefined role, but that this is covered up is typical of postmodern culture.

Careful irony and purposive nostalgia are the keywords of the postmodern political order. On one hand, longstanding social institutions are treated with ironic distance and contempt; yet, on the other hand, these institutions become rallying points for the creation of new political universes. The flag, the courthouse, the mosque: they represent a unity that is irrevocably lost in a world of fragments. Yet, they continue to exist as dimensionless images that rouse the emotions and that have a performative value in a visual economy.

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<sup>48</sup> As is apparent in the old Soviet joke: “Rabinovich, did you read the newspaper?” — “Of course, how else would I know that we are living happy lives!”

The visual economy of performances fragments political and societal solidarity: as discussed, it atomizes individuals, preventing the formation of a shared understanding of class. Thus, while political universes are multiplying, camaraderie and solidarity erode. The continuous barrage of information, fragments, and fluid pieces leads to “controlled being” on a societal scale. The instrumental logic of modernism still functions in the background, determining the technological contours of our era. In the foreground, postmodern culture denies that this modern logic is still operational, yet its omnipresence can only be sustained by technocratic means.

Therefore, the most pressing and urgent task of social and political philosophy is to dare to think and act for oneself beyond this situation. Nevertheless, this is a project that cannot naively use the thinking tools of the past, if only to avoid making the same mistake that postmodernity did.

## **V. Epilogue: Beyond the Hyperreal**

In the preceding analysis of postmodern culture, I have highlighted how the coherence that characterized modern culture was fragmented. Instead of one unifying field of reason, or one metric against which an entire cultural output could be measured, postmodernity has embraced the creative gesture of bricolage.

It should be mentioned that this essay is an attempt to provide a critique from a standpoint that seems less and less visible: the vantage point from which the universe of fragments becomes a more-or-less unified object to study critically. It assumes a space from which a critique can be mounted. However, is this not doomed to fail from the outset—is it not a flagrant contradiction of the main point of this essay? If reality is reduced to a play of images, how can one step outside this all-encompassing bubble? In sketching my position, let me first list four alternatives that seem unattractive and unacceptable ways forward:

First, to return to the modernist worldview would be an anachronism, a nostalgic hankering after the past. It would be a reactionary reinstatement of a cultural agenda to serve as a barrier against the disadvantages of postmodernism, chief among them its epistemological relativism and its subversion of metanarratives.

Second, if we accept the line of argumentation set out above, fully embracing postmodernity would be an ultimately nihilistic gesture: it would amount to taking the hyperreal, represented version of reality as the horizon of one’s cultural understanding. It would amount to accepting the fragmented reality as point of departure. While some would probably argue that all one needs to do is carve out a

safe niche to critique postmodernity from “inside the system,” the main problem with this approach seems to me that each criticism of the postmodern cultural production is countered by irony. Every attempt at criticism is encapsulated in a play of images that is deliberately ironic, keeping the critical potential of each niche at a distance or subverting it from within.

Moreover, it subjects any form of cultural critique to the same relativizing grid, transforming it into another fragment among fragments; a different type of taste than the usual range of cultural dishes on offer, but just another taste, nonetheless. To stay within the system seems unattractive because it pretends that embracing postmodern culture is a conscious choice.

Postmodernity is no longer a cultural attitude or an epistemological outlook. It is—for better or worse—a reality with no exit, a *cul de sac*. It is like being condemned to binge-watch all possible Netflix series together with all your friends, without the option to develop an independent opinion that has not been scrutinized, polished, fragmentized, defanged and relativized across the ever-present plethora of relativist, post-Lyotard socio-cultural norms.

Third, the road to a kind of Marxian or neo-Marxist critique of ideology seems also closed off, because—as I argued—such a philosophical project assumes an external space from which a culture can be understood. However, the theory worked out in the previous sections maintains that such an autonomous space does no longer exist because it also has become a fragment among other fragments. To be a Leftist of some stripe is nowadays almost a default position in certain academic circles; and depending on the intensity of one’s allegiance to such a political orientation, one is either fashionable radical or mainstream egalitarian.

Fourth, one could opt for a quietist alternative. Simply by “logging off,” leading a life without too much digital-cultural interference, reflectively meditating on the meaning of existence. This gesture amounts again to the creation of a personal bubble or an insular contemplative universe, a realm where one pretends that postmodernity had not already come onto the scene.

Of course, all four options sketched above (historicist revisionism, acceptance, pretending to be an outsider, quietism) are theoretical options that lead naturally to the critical question: from which standpoint is such a judgment made? Is it not contradictory to first hold that postmodern culture encapsulates everything, and then second criticize it as if one looked in from the outside?

Here we may recall the fate of Tantalus: standing in a lake, every time he reached for the fruit or the water, it receded. The concentration and efforts of

Tantalus were all in vain, and to realize this was his punishment. But what if Tantalus had decided *not* to reach for the fruits or the water any longer? The whole premise of his punishment was that his desire was stimulated but remained unfulfilled. If Tantalus had seen this, he would have seen the fruits and water for what they were: an illusion that trapped him in a cycle of despair and yearning. We may regard Tantalus as a victim of the hyperreal: it seemed present but was always out of reach. Moreover, it seemed present *for him* specifically: it promised a chance to satisfy *his* appetites.

Instead, we must rethink the issue, and ask what the hyperreal, postmodern world demands from us. The answer is *our participation in its mode of production*. We are seduced to look at this, watch that, read on and on, and also to view the commercials in-between. Without a steady stream of deflected or divided attention to what is being offered, the postmodern strategy of fragmentation is thereby defused. Fragmentation works only then when it succeeds in disintegrating the concentration to such a degree that autonomous thought is stunted and hampered. But take the hyperreal away, and the entire edifice crumbles.

The contemporary response to such a stance would be that one “misses out on” all the benefits and niceties of the world. This thought is so ingrained in a consumer culture that it is hard to see it for what it is: namely, it is the ideological correlative of the politics of fragmentation. The fear for missing out is an irrational aberration for which no proof is provided, and that is regarded as true by stipulation. If I read this particular paper, I cannot read five other ones. Saying that I therefore “miss out on” something is both banal and a tautology. The real question is whether this is problematic at all.

The feeling of “missing out on” things is fed and nourished once one gives in to it. By believing it to be true, the accompanying fear increases, leading one to breathless running after the “new,” “trending,” or “innovative.” By questioning the validity and indeed usefulness of the hyperreal, its structure appears as what it is: a mere screen onto which our deepest insecurities are projected and mirrored back at us.

To exercise one’s autonomy, one must not criticize postmodernity from within, but radically *subtract* oneself from it. In using this term, I appropriate and extend Alain Badiou’s similarly named concept for a purpose for which it was most likely not intended. Subtraction is “the affirmative part of a negation.”<sup>49</sup> The idea is simply that subtraction is a conscious repositioning that creates a new opening, a

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<sup>49</sup> A. Badiou, “Destruction, Negation, Subtraction,” in L. Di Blasi, M. Gagnolati, and C.F.E. Holzhey, (eds.), “The Scandal of Self-Contradiction: Pasolini’s Multistable Subjectivities, Geographies, Traditions,” *Cultural Inquiry* 6 (2012): 269–277, at p. 269.



way to reconceive the current order of things, whether this concerns a system of cultural production or a political situation. The opening is a chance to define a new form of coherence, thereby undermining the realpolitical statement that “this is just how things are.” The development of new possibilities over against an existing situation creates “a new subjective body.”<sup>50</sup> This body can be a political body or group of like-minded individuals, but more importantly, such a body can be a literal body—that is, an essentially embodied human being.

This is not a retreat into an external, pseudo-critical bubble, or a relapse into fatalist quietism, but the unrepentant imposition of a rift between oneself and one’s cultural environment. The difference between retreat and subtraction can be illustrated by thinking of retreating as removing a piece from a jigsaw puzzle. Even without the missing piece, the puzzle is still a puzzle. Subtraction, however, leaves a scar. It is a forceful tearing-oneself-apart from the system of cultural production in which we are situated. Here is Badiou’s description:

Ultimately, I am saying something very simple. I am saying first that to open a new situation, a new possibility, we have to have something like a new creativity of time and a new creativity of the situation, something that is really an opening. I name this opening “event.” What is an event? An event is simply that which interrupts the law, the rules, the structure of the situation, and creates a new possibility.<sup>51</sup>

The “event” is a disruption of the structural logic of an existing cultural, artistic, or political state of affairs. The Copernican Revolution, the Reformation, Marx’s notion of “revolution,” the Darwin/Wallace theory of evolution, or the discovery of the laws of genetic inheritance, can count as major disruptions that upset an entire cultural and/or political order. This undermining paved the way for rethinking the coordinates that structure everyday reality. Not coincidentally, entire political universes revolve around denying that such subtractions took place. For instance, the laws of genetic inheritance disprove outdated theories of race, and the neo-fascist political universe is dedicated to undermining the effect of the prior event, as their worldview hinges on the truth of such theories.

The new possibilities that stem from subtraction need the new “subjective body” in the most literal sense of the word. One must recalibrate oneself with regard to the postmodern system of cultural production if one is to subtract successfully. This requires a new mindset, and a new cognitive and affective, yet fully embodied orientation towards postmodernity.

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<sup>50</sup> A. Badiou, “Affirmative Dialectics: From Logic to Anthropology,” *The International Journal of Badiou Studies* 2 (2013): 1–13, at p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Badiou, “Affirmative Dialectics: From Logic to Anthropology,” p. 3.

To subtract oneself so radically is a necessity. If one chooses for one of the options outlined above, one is still trapped in a hyperreal without exit. To fashion an exit, one must not seek to step *outside* the system, since one is then trapped in a fictional outside that is still inside. Instead, one must seek a position that does not define itself opposite to the postmodern system of cultural production at all, but that creates the opening that topples the entire system.

Such a radical form of subtraction takes postmodern culture up on its core premise: namely, that all expressions are narratives that can be molded and manipulated at will. But what if one took up a position that does not fit the postmodern cultural production? What if one took up a position that was so unrepentantly subjectivist that it lies beyond the grasp of postmodern cultural production or, in other words, what if one simply refused to stay inside the dotted lines? Fully to believe in the autonomy of one's vantage point on the world must nowadays appear as a nightmare. Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion in the postmodern system of cultural production, but what if one's opinion does not fit the scheme of acceptable expressions? What if it does not result into new source materials to be used in the politics of fragmentation? Such a subtraction is possible because it drives the core premise of postmodern culture (namely: every viewpoint is inherently subjective, that is, not universally valid) to its existential endpoint. As argued before, if every viewpoint is inherently subjective, and each position therefore a kind of first-person narrative devoid of universal meaning, this must apply to the postmodern assumption as well.

The best counterpunch, then, is to turn the entire picture around: the initial opposition between "universal" and "narrative" is itself a narrative, and no better way to expose the nihilist fatalism of this cultural attitude than to show how the subjective can generate the universal. The entire postmodern strategy rests on denying that an individual viewpoint can generate something that is universally valid. The result of this attitude is that each viewpoint becomes a malleable fragment in an economy of acceptable and marketable expressions. The proliferation of individual, yet acceptable viewpoints obfuscate a vantage point that becomes less visible over time: namely, that as an individual, one *can* generate universal insights. To deny this is to fully accept and internalize the postmodern assumption and its associated nihilism. To hold that one's position "is just another narrative" is to submit oneself already to the postmodern mode of cultural production, and thereby succumbing to its oppressive and invasive logic of production. To treat one's own convictions as mere narratives devoid of universality is to internalize the postmodern mode of cultural production, severing oneself from the exercise of one's autonomy.

If anything, a renewed and radicalized subjectivism is not the ultimate weapon *of* postmodernity, but *against* it. It is an attitudinal disposition that refuses to regard itself as a mere cog in the machine, and that actualizes the power of its own autonomy and validity through the liberating power of its subjective determinations. It does away with the bland relativism that reality is the sum total of viewpoints, thereby overcoming the postmodern, projected fear that one reasons “just from one’s own privileged perspective”, and that therefore one has to distance oneself from one’s innermost convictions.

I use the term “subjectivism” as a deliberate provocation. The philosophy of high modernity abhorred subjectivism because it was seen as a nonsensical aberration that would have no place in the project of modernity. In postmodern culture, the only type of subjectivism on offer is the watered-down and marketable variety. In both cases, the exercise of individual autonomy is deeply mistrusted and undermined. Nevertheless, what appears from the viewpoint of high modern and postmodern culture as a cultural dead end appears from the viewpoint of radical subjectivism as the way forward—and more importantly, as the road to liberation and the free exercise of autonomy.

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