

THE BREACH, DIGITAL DISRUPTION, THE EVENT:
PSYCHOANALYTIC AND PHILOSOPHIC CRITIQUE OF EMBODIMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Breach, Digital Disruption, the Event:
Psychoanalytic and Philosophic Critique of Embodiment

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The goal of this dissertation is to formulate a critique of embodiment through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis and in the context of digital media and intelligent technologies. Along with psychoanalysis, our research methodology and philosophy are informed by Badiou's philosophy of the event, Stiegler's philosophy of technics and infrastructuralism in media studies. Our study aims to uncover and articulate the implicit conditioning by the primordial trauma constitutive of the subject's encounters with the medium. In our analysis of embodiment, we make extensive use of psychoanalytic concepts such as: the breach, the lack, the signifier, the construction of the object, the object-a, the transitional object, fetishism and phobia. Each of the four parts of the dissertation approaches the topic from a specific angle, such as the theoretical critique of the basic concepts of the subject and object, the function of the metaphor in the context of intelligent technologies, the role of technological infrastructure in the embodiment of the trauma, the construction of a transitional object such as a pop song in the context of technological dystopianism. We demonstrate that the cognitivist presumption concerning the pivotal role of intellectual motivation behind the subjective attachment to information technologies can be significantly shaken from the point of view of the psychoanalytic understanding of drives and jouissance. On the

basis of Alain Badiou's argument, we show the limitations of structurally-determined forms of embodiment considered by psychoanalysis and draw a dividing line between them and the more rare cases of the subjectivation by events suggested by Badiou's theory. We discuss Badiou's concept of the work of truth as an advanced alternative to the psychoanalytic concept of the object and the paradigm of the construction of the (transitional) object. We distinguish the Badiouian concept of the event from the idea of technological/digital disruption, on the one hand, and correlate the latter with the problems discussed in psychoanalysis such as the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father and the crisis of the paternal metaphor along with the problems of the futurity and the disruption of intergenerational communication discussed by Bernard Stiegler on the other.

Keywords: Lacan, Badiou, Freud, Stiegler, Muse, psychoanalysis, infrastructuralism, ontology, digital media, embodiment, trauma, lack, jouissance, transitional object, signifier, topology of the subject, set theory, metaphor, work of truth, event.

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List of Abbreviations and Symbols

\$ - the divided (unconscious) subject.

ADHD – attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

AI – artificial intelligence.

EBT – evidence-based therapies.

EVT – empirically validated treatment.

GPT-3 – Generative Pre-trained Transformer-3.

ICT – information and computation technologies.

NLP (computer science) – natural language processing.

NLP (psychology) – neuro-linguistic programming.

OCD – obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.

S_1 – the signifier that represents the subject.

S_2 – the signifier to which the subject is represented.

Glossary

***Breach, Rupture, Gap* (psychoanalysis, philosophy)** – a figure that condenses the idea of the structural paradoxes inherent to language and/or the fundamental inconsistency of Being.

***Constructible set* (set theory)** – every set in a model of set theory proposed by the mathematician Kurt Gödel; a constructible set can be entirely described on the basis of its components.

***Cover* (set theory)** – is a method of a set's representation as a subset of a structured set. In Badiou's argument, *cover* refers to the symbolic operations through which something extraordinary, such as a piece of art, is relativized and trivialized and rendered constructible, derivative of the preexisting resources and forms.

Embodiment – embraces both the processes and the results of the integration of the individual bodies into the social environment and cultural practices.

Event – in Badiou's philosophy, an indeterministic occurrence through which a truth intervenes and adds as a supernumerary element of an existential/intellectual situation.

***Generic subset* (set theory)** – a nonconstructible set (cannot be described on the basis of its components) which serves as an instrument for the evaluation of

set-theoretic propositions. From this notion, Badiou infers the possibility of thinking the being of truth.

Jouissance – a term of Lacan’s psychoanalysis for enjoyment and/or full satisfaction rendered inaccessible due to the embodiment of language.

Lacanian psychoanalysis – named after the French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), an offshoot of Freudian psychoanalysis influenced by structural linguistics and the formal sciences (topology, logic, set theory).

Lack (psychoanalysis) – the definitive attribute of the subject or subjectivized body; lack correlates with the structural breach within language.

Media – the means of transmission, storage and processing of information; in a broad sense, the notion of medium can also be applied to any artifice and piece of technology considered as an extension of the body (McLuhan).

Mediation – the function of an element called *the medium* that assists in communication and other interactions between people as well as non-human agents and entities.

Object-a – the structural counterpart of the lack; its definitions may vary throughout Lacan’s texts and his commentators.

Paternal metaphor, Name-of-the-Father – a term of Lacan’s psychoanalysis that refers to the imposition of a ban on the infantile incestuous tensions; in structural terms, it designates a symbolic substitution by an explicit interdiction of the impossible and unintelligible ratio between the mother’s and the child’s desire.

Set (set theory) – the fundamental notion in mathematics applicable to any thinkable object. Set theory articulates basic intuitions about objects in terms of

relations such as belonging and inclusion as well as the operations by which sets can be acquired from other sets such as union, intersection, difference, Cartesian product and power set.

Signifier – in the structure of the linguistic sign, the signifier is distinguished from the concept (signified) associated with a sign and refers to its empirical, “exterior” presentation such as a phoneme, letter or their sequences. Lacanian psychoanalysis postulates the primacy of the signifier over the signified.

Subject (psychoanalysis, philosophy) – the post-classical theories of the subject by Lacan and Badiou dissociate it from the self-conscious or phenomenological I as well as any category of the substance; instead, they define the subject in terms of a function from one signifier to another (Lacan) or a trajectory taken by a post-evental truth procedure (Badiou).

Transitional object – according to Winnicott, the first material thing such as a blanket or cuddly toy from which the infant’s entering into object relations with the world begins.

Trauma (psychoanalysis) – the primordial event in the course of embodiment associated with the imposition of language; the trauma is repressed and inaccessible for analysis.

Truth procedures – according to Badiou, the procedures of the present situation’s evaluation and creative transformation from the perspective of a new existential and intellectual possibility discovered in one of the following four areas: love, art, politics and science.

Unconscious – according to Lacan, the unconscious is conditioned by language and corresponds to a gap that occurs in the relation between language and speech as well as the statement and the utterance.

Introduction

Intelligent technologies have become an ordinary component of our reality. They are integrated into our environment and implemented in the devices of everyday use. Their unprecedented spread and availability in the last four decades accustom us to the idea that many cognitive functions can be automated, many problems have algorithmic solutions, and many events and outcomes requiring coordinated collective efforts can be programmed. While we meet some of these new possibilities with enthusiasm, sometimes the presence in our lives of computers and other pieces of intelligent technology provokes anxiety. Behind such intellectual reactions, a variety of embodied effects emerge from our encounters with intelligent artifices. Some theorists predict that the sum total of these interactions will be a new type of personality that adopts to, and coevolves along with, the digital environment. Meanwhile, other researchers consider the epidemic spread of attention deficit disorder and the atrophy of communication skills among young people since the 1990s the warning signs of social and cognitive degradation.

Two worrisome tendencies in people's attitudes to intellectual technologies have important ethical and theoretical implications we wish to address and develop in this project. By turning over to computers such intellectual operations as memorizing, analyzing, reading, writing, calculating, making inferences, selecting, choosing, planning, etc, people are seeking to get rid of the responsibility for these tasks. In simple words, this attests to a rejection of being reasonable as our personal and collective

duty. This first tendency entails the second one, which is pushing humanity towards being irrational. If computers replace people where the latter prove themselves to be unreliable, then the digital rationalization of our existence steadily reinstalls us as more and more unreliable and inadequate agents who cannot and, in fact, to a significant degree, do not trust their own intellectual abilities.

The advance of digital media dramatically and uncontrollably transforms the nature of both interpersonal and mass communication and thereby affects the basic structures of everyday practices and interactions through which we are socialized and realize ourselves as autonomous rationally-thinking and decision-making individuals. The majority of both proponents and critics consider these technologies disruptive regarding preexisting social bonds, institutions, common sense, shared knowledge and values. In media studies, the processes and effects of the integration of individual bodies into the realm of technologically mediated collective practices and norms are studied by the theories of embodiment—a concept and approach imported from anthropology where it is applied to elementary social structures and traditional (pre-industrial) cultures. Thus, the concept of embodiment will assist us in answering the question: How exactly do digital media affect or condition us as subjects? In order to answer this question, we should introduce the criteria by which we select the most relevant and promising approach.

The main motivation of the theories of embodiment is double. First, they articulate the fact that human thinking and behavior are fundamentally conditioned by exterior artificial factors such as culture, knowledge, technologies and the systems of material production and exchanges. Second, such theories try to define the dominant determinant among them. Presumably, embodiment can be critical for identifying the properly human non-biological qualities that explain our cultural behavior and our personal and group identities. However, this presumption can be contested from at least three angles.

On the one hand, as Donna Haraway argues, the difference between the natural and artificial becomes quite vulnerable when we realize that the technological notion of information embraces the heterogeneous areas such as genetics, cognition, social communication and computer technologies (Haraway 151-153). Similar considerations inspire posthumanist and transhumanist hypotheses (Hayles, Braidotti) according to which the dichotomy *natural-artificial* as well as the trichotomy *animal-human-machine* are no longer applicable to human bodies and cognitive faculties. As Hayles explains, these terms are not purely descriptive. *Human* is a constructed identity that presumes an absolute gap between humans and animals on the one hand, and humans and machines on the other (Hayles 3-4). This gap is usually associated with some feature or faculty such as the capacity for language and free will, respectively. According to Hayles, this understanding of embodiment informs the classical (European) concept of the subject as an autonomous, self-conscious, knowledgeable, and moral individual. However, as the grounding the uniqueness of the human being in some distinctive feature becomes irrelevant in the context of the technological reproducibility of both natural and cultural phenomena, the corresponding concept of the subject is also rendered outdated and inapplicable in the framework of posthumanism.

In contrast, the Lacanian tradition attempts to preserve both the category of the subject and the idea of a constitutive difference of the human subject in relation to other beings. Although Lacanian psychoanalysis is also skeptical about intuitive interpretations based on the comparison of humans with animals and machines, it proposes a structural interpretation of this difference instead. In a nutshell, Lacanians *locate* the source of the crucial difference in language, rather than identifying language as *the* difference. In other words, difference is a purely linguistic, symbolic, or structural concept. It involves the purely logical operation of negation which has no analogy in the realm of objects and cannot be formulated in positive terms. Therefore, this structurally-determined difference does not coincide with any positive fact,

such as our capacity for language and its role in the evolution of humankind. Also, for them the most significant fact is not that as the result of the acquisition of language an individual becomes a symbolic creature but that this individual becomes marked—precisely, traumatized—by this very process.

Another objection against the conventional view of embodiment outlined above can be found in Badiou. While for the posthumanists socialization, acculturation, as well as the technological extension and enhancement of bodily functions imply no qualitative difference between humans, animals and machines, for Badiou, the incorporation into these systems is insufficient for becoming a true human subject, which for him means being capable of love, art, science and politics. Accordingly, in his vocabulary, *the transhuman body* is a collective body involved in a scientific inquiry, an artistic process, a political struggle or amorous relations as opposed to a genetically improved and technologically augmented individual body.

These three views of embodiment radically disagree about the nature of its dominant factor. While for the posthumanists it is technology and technological development, for Badiou none of the four areas of subjectivation is reducible to, or derivative from, technology. Further, although both Badiou and Lacanians, in contrast to posthumanists, consider the emergence of the subject to be the necessary element of embodiment and distinguish the subject from the notion of an embodied amalgam of cognitive-behavioral patterns, Badiou does not accept Lacan's postulate of language as the ultimate cause of the subject.

In our dissertation we gather in a dialog several prominent traditions in cultural and media studies such as Lacanian psychoanalysis (Burnham, Grigg, Fink, Johanssen, Lacan, Lury, Mukherjee, Skomra, Soler, Vappereau, Zupančič, Žižek) and contemporary French philosophy (Badiou, Deleuze, Guattari), on the one hand, and Anglophone and Continental media studies represented by infrastructuralism (Farman, Hu, Peters, Pickren), media archaeology (Kittler), media philosophy (Hansen,

Galloway, Thacker, Wark), posthumanism (Braidotti, Haraway, Hayles), critique of postmodernity (Baudrillard) and philosophy of technics (Stiegler) on the other. We attempt both a revision and redefinition informed by media studies—especially, Galloway, Kittler and Stiegler—of fundamental psychoanalytic concepts and a deconstruction informed by psychoanalysis and Badiou’s set-theoretic ontology of the implicit metaphysics behind media determinism and media-theoretic concepts of embodiment. We believe that psychoanalysis contributes to this field by maintaining the focus on the subject and preserving its place in the theoretical world view. This ability not to lose sight of the subject as an active living singularity distinguishes psychoanalysis specifically from the approaches to embodiment that tend to objectify individuals as bodies and assign an active role exclusively to the medium and mediation.

The goal of this dissertation is to formulate a critique of embodiment through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis and in the context of digital media and intelligent technologies. By *critique*, we mean that our study pursues the uncovering and articulation of the implicit conditioning by the primordial trauma constitutive of the subject’s encounter—all subjects’ encounters—with the medium. Our research operates with a quite conservative and demanding concept of the subject in contrast to more versatile concepts of the multiple subject and subject-assemblage promoted by postmodernists and posthumanists. Lacan’s concept of trauma and the correlative concepts of breach and lack (which we define below) presume that the occurrence of an inherently divided subject is the invariant outcome of embodiment despite any changes in the technological infrastructure. Therefore, this approach excludes the possibility of the occurrence of a new subject as well as the sufficient qualitative variability of subjects presumably conditioned by the technological reshaping of the environment and communication. Meanwhile, Badiou’s critique reveals that Lacan’s analysis of the linguistic determination of the subject was not conclusive. Badiou contests the logical leap from the linguistic conditioning of human beings to the postulate of the

subject as its outcome and argues towards more demanding criteria. His approach allows us to show the limitations of the structurally-determined forms of embodiment considered by psychoanalysis and to draw a dividing line between them and the more rare cases of the subjectivation by events suggested by Badiou's theory. On the basis of this argument, we also achieve greater clarity regarding the quite speculative and philosophical question of the conditioning by technology of politics, art or science.

In the methodological section below, we give a detailed overview of Lacan's concept of embodiment and correlative concepts such as: the breach, the lack, the signifier, the construction of the object, the object-a, the transitional object, fetishism and phobia.

The Lacanian concept of Embodiment

In contrast to the alternative concepts of embodiment, the Lacanian approach is based on the understanding that language is inherently paradoxical or incommensurable. The acquisition of language both equips a prospective speaker with the spoken or written word as a means of self-expression and shapes her/his entire inner world—experience, memories, mental states, intentions, affects, inner speech. Further, this speaker will constantly correlate what they say with their inner perspective and motives. In other words, language totally determines both the form and the content of what is spoken. However, these two instantiations of language—embodied and spoken—are in conflict with each other for reasons to which only modern logic and mathematics comparatively recently (in the beginning of the twentieth century) have found access. In formal terms, those developments imply that for a given language it is impossible to give an interpretation which would be complete, consistent and verifiable at the same time (Gödel, Turing). This conclusion is universally applicable to all symbolic systems, the translation of the implicit linguistic form into explicit speech

included. In slightly different terms, we might say that within the same language a structural breach divides the infrastructure, i.e. language as the system interpreted through communication, and superstructure, i.e. language as a means of its own interpretation. Here, *a complete interpretation* means that one system of symbols and the rules of their combination is entirely translated into, or covered by, an alternative system. For example, in linguistics, phonology assigns a special letter/character to each phoneme of a spoken language. *A consistent interpretation* presumes that it adequately conveys the same information as the one expressed by means of the original system. In contrast to phonology, most alphabets are phonetically inconsistent because they can be tolerant of both several different vocalizations of one letter—e.g. “c” in English—and different letters for one sound, such as all English vowels for “schwa,” ə. Finally, there must be an independent way to check whether the interpretation is full and consistent with the interpreted system. Every formal—i.e. systemic, mathematized, and rigorous—interpretation of language fails to satisfy at least one of these conditions. Meanwhile, the incommensurability between, on the one hand, the institutionalized symbolic systems, from national languages to political, economic and cultural institutions and, on the other, their discursive—common sense, ideological, and theoretical—representations, in other words the means of their interpretation and exploitation is impossible to ascertain.

Breach, gap, rupture are figures that refer to the first pivotal analytic concept we should consider. Psychoanalysis approaches this problem in terms of the divided subject. The irreparable breach inside language becomes the source of the unconscious. Embodiment occurs as a constant registration and re-inscription on the body—in a form of a quasi-discourse of perceptions and memory traces—effected by external discourse and by communicative events complemented by the inner monitoring of corporeal events (Freud, Lacan, Vappereau). To distinguish these registrations from the information learned from communication and to emphasize the principal importance

of this representation of the *form* of the external discourse as the *form* of internal discourse, Lacan suggested considering them signifiers as the counterparts of signifieds in the structure of the sign (Lacan, *Autres écrits* 15). By analogy with the spoken and written word, the signifier is inevitably split because, while by definition no signifier signifies itself, it is impossible to define whether its instances—one in the external discourse (of the Other) and the other in the subject—make it one or two (Lacan, Derrida, Vappereau).¹ Thus, the human being conceived as a speaking subject lacks a part, a copula that would connect or correlate these two registers. In contrast to need, which biology defines on the basis of the object whose lack produces it, the order of signifiers introduces a lack that is absolute in the sense that no ratio exists between it and the symbolic constructs with which the subject tries to fill it. The second principal analytic concept, *the object*, concerns this absent part.

Therefore, the fundamental breach concerns neither the difference between animal instincts and social norms, nor the dichotomy of the natural and artificial. Moreover, it is neither a generation gap nor the historic type of rupture that presumably separates modernity from other epochs, capitalism from traditional economies, secular culture and scientific rationality from mythological thinking etc., as many critics of modernity suggest. From the Lacanian point of view, all these options attempt to intellectualize, relativize and thus obfuscate the structural necessity of the inherent incommensurability of language. None of them considers the conflicting systems as one and the same instance. For example, the idea of the generation gap (maintained by proponents of technological/digital disruption as well as by posthumanists and Stiegler) reduces the problem to the presumption that some transformative factor that dictates the new rules and goals of life—evolutionary, ideological, or technological—renders unreliable the system of values and meanings that the older generations seek to reproduce in the younger ones. Thus, the figure *generation* serves to conserve the groundless assumption that at a certain moment the beliefs of a generation *do* satisfy their needs.

Analogously, the classical distinction between the natural and the artificial reduces the structural gap to the conflict between, on the one hand, tensions deemed spontaneous and primordial and, on the other, the available means of their acculturation and mitigation. Meanwhile, by pointing out the irrelevancy of this dichotomy, posthumanists risk losing sight of the underlying problem by assuming that technology finally bridges the gap between incommensurable manifestations of the infrastructure. This tendency is evident from their attempts to present what the classical convention considers incommensurable—culture, spirituality, free will, on the one hand, and natural causality, instincts, individual mortality, on the other—as commensurable by means of hybrid terms such as *biotechnology*, *genetic engineering* etc., or the concept of the uniformity of genetic, neural, symbolic and digital information.

The psychoanalytically informed critique of embodiment should pursue the study of the manifestations and effects of the incommensurability at the heart of this process. In the first place, this presumes the critique of the object in the aforementioned sense. The object is a paradoxical correlate of the breach. The lack of the object means that no object can fill it, i.e. the object able to do this will always be lacking or, from another angle, the lack of it will always be reproduced. In terms of incorporation, this inaccessible remainder that Lacan calls *the object-a* is often metaphorized as a “part” torn off from the living being by language. In this sense, it is an aspect of corporeality rendered inaccessible by the necessity to express needs verbally and coordinate them with an artificial, symbolically structured environment. From the psychoanalytical standpoint, the constant construction of the object is a sub-process of embodiment and a necessary consequence of embodied lack. However, since its construction pursues an unattainable goal, each such construct offers only an illusory solution and a symptomatic satisfaction. While the illusory solution involves a fantasy of filling the lack, i.e. fixing the gap, the satisfaction with such an object is symptomatic insofar as it dissimulates the repressed principal dissatisfaction. Accord-

ing to Freud and Lacan, nighttime dreams and delirium reveal an inconvenient truth about the nature of our conscious thinking and the concepts we operate with. The socialized/subjectivized body responds to the division imposed by language in a very specific way. Incorporated into the system of social institutions and their material infrastructure, it begins producing messages that its “host”—the conscious I—can neither control nor conceive of, such as dreams, nightmares, lapses and psychosomatic symptoms. These are compromise formations that for psychoanalysts signify the unrecognized functioning of an autonomous discourse which the mind cannot make sense of. Psychoanalytical interpretation reveals that nighttime dreams and fantasies always both feature and disguise contradictory thoughts and intentions. Therefore, with Lacan we should distinguish between the object-a as the inaccessible correlate of the lack and its symptomatic/symbolic substitutes.

The theoretical critique of the object should also take into account that the construction of the object already includes its constant critique. In the course of its incorporation into the universe of social conventions, the subject learns how to discriminate between the material media that give support to its unconscious libidinal tensions and help to coordinate the subject relative to the exterior symbolic space. Also, the overcoming of pathological forms of satisfaction such as the fetishistic or phobic biases (see below) establishes the way of the inner critique of fantasy. Finally, with Lacan, we may consider desire the major motive force of the permanent criticism of the object: since desire is always the desire for something that one does not have, it instantiates the impossibility of satisfaction embodied along with the fundamental lack. Thus, the inversion between being a value and being an item of waste is inherent in every object.

The concept that refers to the primary substitute, the object that introduces into the life of the individual the paradigm of the satisfaction of the lack with an object, is *the transitional object*. It captures the construction of the object in the aspect of its

evolution from a primitive form. A transitional object involves a real material object that acquires a special symbolic status and mediates the subject's relationship with the world and other subjects, or in other words the subject's inclusion into the discursive space. In our individual biography, its earliest instantiations are usually a blanket or a cuddly toy (also called *the comfort objects*). At a certain time in a toddler's life, a cuddly toy begins to function as a partial substitute for the mother's physical presence. In turn, the child develops a strong attachment to this object and redirects to it the libidinal tensions meant for the mother. Thereby a material object provided by the child's significant other becomes her symbolic representative that involves the child in the realm of representations and symbolic exchanges. Also, through its interaction with this object, the child both completes the subjective separation from the mother and invents and masters intuitive concepts of object and objective reality (Winnicott, Abram).

In the construction of a transitional object, the material medium serves as a screen for fantasy, desire, and affects. Initially, it is a random and usually banal external object which nonetheless acquires an exceptional significance for the subject. Surprisingly, this element also prefigures the function of writing as a means of exteriorization of inner speech. Without the possibility of exteriorization, the object that internally preoccupies the subject persists only as a phantasm, a hallucination, a content fundamentally confused with, and distorted by, desire; in this sense it is cognate with dreams and delirium. In contrast to these subjective contents, the medium—a comfort object, a scribble, a drawing, or a piece of writing—can be corrected—replaced, modified, completed, etc.—in the course of therapy or self-analysis (Lacan, Vappereau).

Everything that the subject projects onto the object echoes and metaphorizes the aforementioned primordial gap. While some theorists, such as Stiegler, prefer interpreting it as inherently ambivalent, alternatively we may distinguish between *good* and *bad objects* and consequently compare the (good) transitional object with

other two subjectively privileged types of (the bad) object, which are invested with very peculiar personal meaning: the phobic object and the fetish. According to the popular explanation, the subject projects fears and feelings of guilt onto the former and the desire for power onto the latter. Psychoanalysis maintains that phobias are the typical form of the subjective fear of castration. Castration is a common individual fantasy and a concept that most children usually come up with by the age of five. This construct embodies the traumatic element of the ongoing separation from the mother and the early encounter with sexual difference. Therefore, phobia deals with the negative images that echo the primordial trauma. Phobic fantasies usually feature a specific act such as a bite, a blow or a cut that marks the moment together with the fact of the humiliation and deprivation unconsciously associated with this trauma. In the guise of such marks and the act of their making, the primitive concept of sexual difference as *having or not having a penis* is articulated.

Meanwhile, fetishism occurs when the subject fails to produce such a concept and instead creates a hallucinatory substitute that helps her/him to ignore the insistence of separation along with the limitations of desire and enjoyment. Most often, fetishes overemphasize the aspect of the object's wholeness and the indestructibility of a certain imaginary property. Admittedly, throughout the entire history of humankind, the phallus remained an emblematic fetish because it manifests the denial of castration. Obviously, without causing serious complications in the individual's socialization, none of the objects that mediate these subjective concepts can serve as a substitute for the mother's presence through the process of separation and function as a guide to the big, wide world. Accordingly, we shall assume that, to construct a good transitional object, the subject must invent a neutral concept-metaphor of castration and thereby avoid the two extremes at issue.

The important feature of the object is that its construction can fail either right from the start or at a later point. There is no algorithm for its creation. Everyone must

invent it on their own. Neither can the positive effect of the object be programmed or guaranteed. As Stiegler summarizes,

[U]ltimately, *things* can constitute a *world* only insofar as they irreducibly proceed from the transitional character of the object. Having become ordinary and everyday, and in this sense ‘mundane’ (or ‘intramundane’), the transitional object conserves its pharmacological dimension [the capacity of being both good and harmful], even if this ‘mundanity’ tends to conceal this dimension. As such, it can always engage not only curative projection processes but poisonous ones, becoming, for example, the support of an addiction, the screen of melancholy, and even a drive of destruction, of murderous madness, of those dangerous states that result when the feeling that life is worth living has been lost (Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living* 3-4).

This observation helps us to extend the critique of the (transitional) object to the category of technological objects as by definition functional objects. Since every object is inherently both functional and dysfunctional, the object’s positive identification on the basis of its function alone involves the dissimulation of this ambivalence.² Stiegler points out that, from the perspective of the transitional object as both the logically and psychologically primary object, the neutrality, ordinariness, and mundanity of things is a secondary and very unstable property. Therefore, the idea of objective, i.e. independent, properties such as functions is a complementary construction that conceals both the primary subjective bonds with the object and the ambivalence of the trajectory of its construction. In a sense, the subject tends to reestablish this concealed dimension regarding the things that s/he has at her/his disposal. This becomes evident from the role of the objects in the misuses and deviations mentioned by Stiegler as well as from the trivial facts of their abuse. Children intentionally break their favorite toys. Adults develop addictions to various toxic substances. Impulsive

consumers tend to collect a lot of household items, which are subsequently sent to the yard sale obsolete yet unused.

Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of four essays that approach the topic from four different angles.

In Chapter I, we propose a critical revision of Lacan's concepts of the subject and object on the basis of the argument elaborated in three volumes of the fundamental oeuvre *Being and Event* (1988, 2006, 2018) by Alain Badiou. Badiou's revisions help us, on the one hand, to reevaluate Lacan's theory in the context of alternative views of embodiment (Haraway, Hayles, Hansen, Stiegler), and, on the other, to connect its implicit interest in the ontology of the medium with contemporary media-ontological ideas developed mostly within media archaeology and infrastructuralism. Although Badiou does not develop special theories of media and technology, we will show that his argument is directly applicable to the ontology of media and the critique of the media-determinist views of embodiment. Thus, this critique informs our choice of research philosophy.

In Chapter II, we develop Lacanian intuitions concerning metaphor as a symbolic construct that involves the inherent incommensurability of language. A metaphor is a figure that substitutes one term for another and thereby enacts language's reflexive relation to itself. At the same time, metaphors always preserve a certain inconsistency between the terms due to which they cannot become regular substitutes for one another. Lacan considers the emergence of the mechanism of metaphoric substitution a condition of the child's subjective separation from the mother. In the chapter, we explain the meaning of the notions *the paternal metaphor* and *the Name of the Father* and argue that these concepts are pivotal for understanding the function of

metaphors in their common sense as well as in jokes, insults and nicknames. We discuss the ways in which digital media culture reveals itself to be hostile, and repressive of, the metaphoric dimension of speech. We also consider elements of the incompatibility of the ideals implemented in computer technologies with the possibility of metaphors.

In Chapter III, we explain the connection in psychoanalysis of the structural rupture—in the Other, in the signifier—with the primordial trauma. We demonstrate that a breach or split that reveals itself in the process of embodiment conditions a wide variety of corporeal and psychic effects such as drives and *jouissance*, which resist the imperative of cognition and education imposed by the institutions of socialization. As we show in particular, the environments meant to control and correct the course of socialization, such as education and medicine, cannot eliminate the breach or provide any alternative mode of embodiment that would not produce a traumatic core in the individual. Quite the opposite, these institutions inevitably produce or catalyze other issues. In general, this line of reasoning undermines the *doxa* that technological improvements and institutional reforms improve our situation as cultural beings. In psychoanalytic theory, we also find reasons for suspending the assumption that the modern subject's attachment to information media and smart devices is conditioned by some inherent drive to knowledge. Instead, we suggest distinguishing between the hysteric's desire behind the desire to know and the maternal desire behind the attachment to the medium.

In Chapter IV, we propose a case study of the construction of an object in the sense specified in the methodological section above. The object of our analysis is the song "The Void" from the album *Simulation Theory* (2018) by Muse. Our study demonstrates how, through a series of interviews and at the intersection of cultural and personal narratives, the song becomes the medium for a message about overcoming a techno-phobic mindset. To emphasize its properties of a transitional object, our

analysis moves towards more direct manifestations of anxiety as well as phobic and fetishistic motifs in Muse's repertoire. Meanwhile, along guidelines set by Badiou's theory of subject, behind pop-cultural tropes, strategies of self-promotion and tententious interpretations, we also track the signs of an emerging artistic and political subjectivity in Muse as a collective subject. This approach allows us to establish that the chief affect featured in "The Void" concerns an ineffable difference between simulation and reality and further demonstrate that the Muse frontman locates music making precisely within this gap. We also argue that the intuition of this in-between space informs Muse's image of political struggle as resistance to the hegemonic system of appearances created with the help of the most advanced technologies.

Chapter 1

Critique of Lacan's Theory of Embodiment

A thorough critical revision of Lacan's approach to embodiment can be found in Badiou. It involves the following questions: 1) Is becoming a speaking being sufficient for being a subject? 2) Is the object constructible? and 3) Is the corresponding critique of the object, specifically the dialectics of value and waste product, applicable to love, science, politics and art? According to Badiou, the latter four are the conditions of philosophy. He asserts that philosophy establishes itself as a general reflection on Being, Truth and Subject in the light of the possibility of aesthetic extension of perception, political revolutionizing of collective life, scientific motivation for knowledge, and the transformation and repurposing by love of the communication between sexes. Further, we will also discuss the possibility of replacing Lacan's concept of the object with the concept of the work of truth. Badiou introduces it in *The Immanence of Truths* (2018) and applies it to the outcomes of art, science, politics and love. For now, we may specify the second question in terms of this new concept as follows: Is the work of truth the object?

According to Badiou, Lacan's version of the origin of the subject can be corrected

as follows. 1) Instead of identifying the negative elements of embodiment such as the breach and lack as bridges that link the subject up with the infrastructure—technological, mediatic, discursive etc.—that in turn provides the material conditions for the body, we should consider them only as conditions of possibility for subjectivation. 2) Consequently, subjectivation should be thought only in terms of *becoming* and *process* but not in terms of being (Badiou, *Being and Event* 455). 3) From this angle, instead of the structural interpretation, the rupture can be conceptualized in terms of *the event*, i.e. in terms of temporality. In *Logics of Worlds* (2006), Badiou asserts that Lacan was not completely unaware of the possibility of an alternative scenario of subjectivation, however

the formal operations of incorporation into the place of the Other and of splitting of the subject constitute, under the name of Unconscious, the infrastructure of the human animal and not the occurrence—as rare as it may be—of the present-process of a truth. . . Lacan’s anticipation restricts its implementation to the truths of psychoanalysis, which are truths of structure. The act in which the cure sometimes resolves itself indubitably involves its application to the real, but it is marked by the scepticism with which every de-absolutization of what is created by chance shields itself (*Logics of Worlds* 481).

Badiou argues that, as the product of “incorporation into the place of the Other and of splitting of the subject,” the human animal is not the subject through whom real change occurs in the world. Certainly, Lacan maintains that rather than embodying certain behavioral, symbolic and cognitive patterns, the subject emerges from the vicissitudes of the very process of such embodiment. However, this crucial difference between Lacan’s consideration of “the infrastructure of the human animal” and the dominant techno-deterministic approach to subjectivity risks being eliminated due to one assumption they have in common, precisely that the infrastructure—technological,

mediatic, discursive etc.—is the necessary and sufficient condition of the subject. In turn, such a condition (or conditions) can also have a hierarchical structure in which the conditions of one level, e.g. the conditions of experience, are conditioned by higher-level conditions. Quite predictably, a number of scholars conclude that technologies establish the ultimate and in this sense transcendental set of conditions of possibility for all other cultural, social and individual substructures. For instance, Mark Hansen argues that the evolution of this supreme system, or *technesis* as he dubs it, cannot be understood in terms of inferior systems:

In seeking to localize the extracultural, extrasocial dimension of technological change, I thus mean to suggest that technologies function much like language games on Wittgenstein's model. Within the contemporary post-modern lifeworld, they are simply more basic than other social phenomena: not unlike language for Wittgenstein, technologies play an essential role as part of what allows for the very existence of the social as such (Hansen 3).

For Hansen as well as Ihde whom he cites on this occasion, the incorporation into such a system means that human experience, i.e. how we perceive and understand the world, is totally determined or “informed” by technologies (2-3). Thus, while scholars like Hansen and Ihde identify the subject on the basis of a positive (cognitive) experience, Lacan associates the subject with the negativity of desire. Meanwhile, both consider to be inevitable the production of the subject at the intersection of the human body and the exterior system of the artificial lifeworld.

Badiou observes that although Lacan's theory anticipates this crucial difference, Lacan “shields” psychoanalytic discourse from considering anything beyond “the truths of structure,” e.g. events as manifestations of a fundamental structure. For Lacan, truth means the uncovering of the object's obscene underside. The full truth turns it into an abject object. That is why, according to Lacan's prescription, the psychoana-

lyst “should not fall in love with truth.” Lacan deliberately maintains the dualism of the object-*objet* regarding works of art and literature. On the one hand, the creative work of artists and writers is both the process and the result of the correction of the preconscious contents exteriorized in the form of a piece of art/literature. Lacan’s most prominent example of this kind is the writing of James Joyce. Lacan calls Joyce’s writing—not his fiction but precisely writing with its idiomatic spelling, hybrid words etc.—*an artifice, an invention* by means of which the Irish man of letters repaired his subjective bonds with his native language, the symbolic mandates he had to accept, and even his own body (Lacan, *Seminar XXIII* 130-133). On the other hand, a literary object inevitably turns to *litter*, the garbage the subject casts off and dissociates from (*Autres écrits* 11). From another angle, the notion of garbage is applicable to what serves as material for the object. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan points out that, to create pictures, painters literally use colored dirt (*Seminar XI* 117). In “Lituraterre” and *Seminar XVIII*, he asserts that literature consists in accommodating the leftovers (*restes*) of the oral culture (*Autres écrits* 11). Badiou objects: when Lacan identifies the constitutive lack of the subject as the lack of an object, “he takes a step too far in the direction of finitude,” while “[t]he breach is . . . on the side of creation, not of the symptom” (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 481). Being a speaking being does not suffice for being capable of love, art, politics or science:

It is only as a transhuman body that a subject takes hold of the divisible body of the human animal. The breach is then on the side of creation, not of the symptom, and I am not persuaded that the ‘case’ of Joyce—‘Joyce-the-sinthome,’ as Lacan says—suffices to dissolve the one into the other. Rather, we observe the gap between, on one hand, the transcendental laws of appearing and, on the other, the present engendered by a subjectivizable body, a present that initiates an eternal truth. This is also the gap between the multiple-body of the human animal and its subjective incorporation

(481).

This passage implicitly opposes the object constructed according to the laws of language—“the transcendental laws of appearing”—to eternal truth. This leads us to question two: Is the object constructible?

The dilemma behind this question can be clarified on the basis of Stiegler’s insightful commentaries regarding the concept of the transitional object. In *What Makes Life Worth Living*, he begins by pointing out the counterintuitive nature of such objects:

The transitional object has a distinct virtue: it does not exist. Certainly, something exists that enables it to appear—for example, a teddy bear or cuddly toy. But what makes this teddy bear or cuddly toy *able* to open up ‘transitional space’—which Winnicott also called ‘potential space’—in which the mother *can* encounter *her* child; what makes this teddy bear or cuddly toy able to become the transitional object, is that, beyond that part of the object that exists in external space, beyond or beneath this piece of cloth, there holds something that is precisely neither in exterior space, nor simply internal to either the mother or the child (Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living* 1).

In the intermediate status of the object, we recognize the problematic splitting of a symbolic element between exterior and interior spaces that we previously mentioned regarding the nature of the signifier. The transitional space occurs as a space where the presence of language, the reality and insistence of symbolic mediation itself, must be symbolized and mediated by means of transitional objects. In other words, this is the space of a substitute language-commentary superimposed on the symbolic infrastructure of the communication between mother and child. When it comes to finding an appropriate predicate for the components embraced by this space, Stiegler unhesitatingly chooses *infinite*. In particular, he specifies that the primordial dyad—the

mother and child—presumes an infinite component which he remarkably identifies as *love* and describes it as the co-adaptation of their incompatible existential horizons:

In this beyond or beneath of both the exterior and the interior, there is something that holds *between* the mother and her child, and which nevertheless does not exist. What takes hold between the mother and child in not existing, but in passing through the transitional object, and which therefore finds itself constituted by it, links and *attaches* them to one another through a wonderful relationship: a relation of love, of *amour fou*.

What holds and is upheld as this link through which these two beings become incommensurable and infinite for one another, is what, by allowing a place for that which is infinite, *consists* precisely to the *immeasurable extent that it does not exist*—because the only things that exist are finite things (1-2).

It is clear that in the cited passage *infinite* as *incommensurable* is synonymous with *indefinite*, *inaccessible* as *nonconstructible* for the subjects in question. We may assume that, regarding the infinitely diverging subjective perspectives, the finite object can function only as a “cipher” and does not actually fill the gap. On the one hand, it cannot both be finite—delineated, defined—and *effectively* mediate the infinitely incommensurable. This is why love takes on this function instead. On the other hand, since its function includes introducing the category of object to the child, the transitional object as the first object can succeed only provided that it is principally finite like all other things. Therefore, this finite part of the object must be constructible.

Let us specify that since there cannot be any constructible solution regarding the primordial division—which in this case concerns the reproduction of the meaning of the symbolic mediation in the mother and child’s communication—the object’s

property of being constructible characterizes it in the aspect of a mistake, a failure. A fundamental contradiction occurs as this finitude of the object is imposed on the infinitude of the object's lack i.e. the infinitude of desire. The transitional object introduces finitude into the realm of subjective lack and desire in three respects. First, it requires an exterior material medium. Second, the cycle of its construction must be finite. Third, the transitional object has value only for the one who produces it. All this implies that generally we should always consider the subject's relationship with the object a symptom in the sense discussed above.

However, despite the finite time of its creation, the spectrum of possibilities—the potential space—that the transitional object opens for the subject-to-be is immeasurable:

[T]he transitional object does not only concern the child and mother: it is also, as first *pharmakon*, the origin of works of art and, more generally, of the life of the mind or spirit in all its forms, and thus of adult life as such. It is, finally, the origin of *all* objects, because an object is always that which, once upon a time, appeared to a mind that *projected* it (3).

Among the phenomena that find their origin in the transitional object, Stiegler mentions art. This brings us to our second question, to which the cited passage suggests an affirmative answer. However, in the light of Badiou's theory of truths, we cannot accept this claim unconditionally. We completely disagree with Stiegler's assumption of the ontological priority of the medium, the technological object—*pharmakon*—over the work of art. In *Technics and Time 1*, he explicitly states that he considers technics “the horizon of all possibility to come and of all possibility of a future” (*Technics and Time, 1 ix*). If this were so, it would mean that there is no alternative to considering the work of art as determined by the infrastructure and therefore belonging to the realm of the symptoms produced in the course of embodiment. Moreover, we would have to accept that the problem of the fundamental breach

either presumes a technological solution or at least can be adequately articulated as the problem of *technics*. While we agree to accept the association of the transitional object's construction with an event that opens access to the infinite space of new possibilities, we distinguish between, on the one hand, the transitional object, its construction and primary function in individual psychic development, and, on the other, the work of art or, more generally, the work of truth. We should maintain that the infinitude in question concerns only the latter and requires the subjectivation by truths for which the ability to create a transitional object does not suffice.

Badiou's critique should help to advance our understanding of the breach and the object in the following direction. First, language and the breach must be dissociated. According to Badiou, the means for this are provided by set theory. In set theory, language is only a particular operation that puts into correspondence the elements of two sets and represents or identifies the elements of one of them as the terms of language. In other words, being a set, a multiple, is logically prior to the structures superimposed on this multiple such as a signifier, letter, number or system of signs. If the elements of a set are not specified by means of the count or of naming, their relations can still be grasped by set-theoretic operators. The fundamental paradoxes of self-reference that occur when language is applied to itself are not unique to language. They are reproducible on more general levels and therefore characterize the symbolic system as *a set*. This implies that the lack is not introduced into the subjectivized body by language as language. Its roots lie in the incommensurability of a structure with the unspecified and indifferent multiple that provides its ontological background.

This first step is consistent with the suggestions that Lacan makes in the text "Radiophony." There, Lacan asserts that since embodiment occurs as a translation of the external universe of signs, in other words the system of symbolic values, into the individual body/mind, the link between the external and embodied versions is in itself what fundamental mathematics defines as *a function* (Lacan, *Autres écrits* 409). A

function is an operation that associates elements from a set with elements that either belong to another set or to the same set. *Function* is a fundamental notion. If it is continuous, it preserves the structure of the original set in the image-set that it produces. Otherwise, it simply establishes one-to-one correspondence between some elements. Without this notion, we could not say much about a set, e.g. how many elements are there, etc. In other words, properties—both qualitative and quantitative—are derivative of functions. The notion of the predicate specifies the notion of the function for the first-order logic applied to natural and artificial languages. Generally, the notion of *function* helps us to realize that the so-called acquisition of language is not entirely a psychological, neurological or cognitive process. There are independent and purely formal features of it that neither depend on, nor are reducible to, the logic of any of these domains. However, these formal factors are also not entirely explainable in terms of language—as a function that maps a nonstructured set onto a structured one—alone. Thus, by referring to the notion of function, Lacan submits for revision his own doctrine about the linguistic determination of the subject.

The second step in the proposed revision of Lacan's concepts requires dissociating the idea of the object from the idea of finitude. Set theory also informs Lacan's theory of the object. If—as this follows from the previous notes—language primarily operates with sets, the object cannot be anything but a set too. In set theory Lacan recognizes a model of what he promotes as the construction of the object. *Set* is the most general representation of the mathematical object. Prior to its articulation in terms of set theory, such an object does not exist. Instead, at one's disposal are only intuitive images and common preconceptions. In mathematics, *set* is a term maximally purified from any intuitive content such as ideas of quantity or quality. Lacan points out that set theory constructs its objects—sets—as letters. In other words, only after a letter (a written sign) explicitly articulated by a finite series of equations and propositions replaces the intuitive concept of set in a mathematician's

reasoning is a set properly defined as a set. Analogously, Lacan imagines a transition from the individual fantasies that preoccupy the subject to well-articulated transmittable formulas—*mathemes*. The task of the Lacanian subject is to construct her/his object as a set, i.e. to purify it from parasitic imaginary contents and detach it from symptomatic satisfactions. As Lacan notes,

Freud... considered that everything is just a dream and everyone... is crazy, that is to say delirious. This should be shown, though; and for this any object fits because—no matter how good it is by itself—it is always presented badly. That is to say, it must be corrected. It is a fact that mathematics *corrects* and that what it corrects is *the* object. Hence, my reduction of psychoanalysis to set theory (“Lacan Pour Vincennes”).

For Lacan, mathematical operating with letters is the ideal of analysis. *The object-a* refers exactly to such an object-set as an object-letter—the letter *a*—as a goal.

Badiou disagrees with Lacan’s equation of set theory’s analytic power with the power of its notation or system of writing. The representation by means of finite written signs of sets as multiplicities is not a neutral operation. It is rather an imposition of finitude, countability, and constructibility on the thinking of sets. Meanwhile, as mathematician Paul Cohen demonstrated in 1963, non-constructible sets are both possible on the basis of set theory and necessary for the set-theoretic generalizations concerning infinite sets and the theory’s representation by language (Badiou, *Being and Event* 312).³ Therefore, the correlate of the lack introduced into the subjectivized body by language is not necessarily a finite object or an object constructible by finite means. The object constructed as a letter does not suffice to properly articulate this lack. The gap between language and its ontological foundation involves non-constructible or, in Cohen’s terms, *generic* subsets. Through a lengthy series of arguments, Badiou demonstrates that the latter notion is best suited for thinking the being of truths as the non-constructible/generic extensions of the ontological

foundation. Precisely, Cohen suggested using a generic set as a tool⁴ for the *evaluation* of relations between the fundamental set-theoretic propositions. In particular, this implies that while the predicate *true* can be applied to language expressions and is guaranteed by the possibility of non-constructible sets, it is independent regarding language and sets constructible on its basis, or in simple words unexplainable in terms of language.⁵

Therefore, the subject of such truths is not identical to a subject capable of language and speech. Truths do not emerge and cannot be formulated on a regular basis like other language expressions. Their occurrence is a pure event and cannot be programmed. One becomes a subject only postfactum by choosing, by making a personal commitment to, some unprovable and unconditional claim such as a confession of love, a theorem, a revolutionary slogan or an aesthetic experiment. Love, science, politics and art can never be taken for granted. There has always been societies where one or more of these phenomena either stagnated or remained unknown. They are generic extensions on the basis of which collective and individual existence is evaluated. Therefore, the answer to the question Stiegler asks in the title of his book *What Makes Life Worth Living?* is the subject engaged in amorous relations, artistic creation, political struggle, or scientific inquiry.

Being subjectivized by truth—i.e. true love, politics, art or science—means to entirely devote yourself to the endless process of affirmation both by words and life of the *absolute* value of the enterprise you are involved with. In a certain sense, such a subject lives in the same world as all others but for this subject this world is extended by the anticipation of the possibility that it can become, for instance, a place for the love between the couple or, for the political subject, the space of freedom and equality. In other words, such subjectivation occurs as the radical transformation of both one's intellectual and existential perspectives regarding the world. Badiou calls the symbolic formation, the signifier that mediates the subject's access to this

anticipated world, *the Idea*. The true subject shares its destiny with the Idea s/he holds to, e.g. being judged, evaluated, scrutinized both together with, and on the basis of, its force. Briefly, the true subject constantly proves her/him/themselves faithful to their truth—love, politics, scientific or artistic method—and remains consistent with it:

[I]f there has been an event, and if truth consists in declaring it and then in being faithful to this declaration, two consequences ensue. First, since truth is evental, or of the order of what occurs, it is singular. It is neither structural, nor axiomatic, nor legal. No available generality can account for it, nor structure the subject who claims to follow in its wake. Consequently, there cannot be a law of truth. Second, truth being inscribed on the basis of a declaration that is in essence subjective, no preconstituted subset can support it; nothing communitarian or historically established can lend its substance to the process of truth. Truth is diagonal relative to every communitarian subset; it neither claims authority from, nor (this is obviously the most delicate point) constitutes any identity. It is offered to all, or addressed to everyone, without a condition of belonging being able to limit this offer, or this address (*Saint Paul* 14).

This explains why Badiou deems true subjects to be rare.

Badiou asserts that every work of truth is marked by an event and its belongingness to a truth procedure—art, politics, love or science. He defines the work of truth as a fragment of the post-evental actualization of new possibilities. It is infinite in the sense that no method can establish its ratio relative to the infinite process it is a fragment of. However, abstracted from its dynamics, it is rendered finite and can be presented as constructible. For example, the creation of a piece of art or the proof of a theorem obviously involve already-available resources and discursive means. To this operation of the substitution by a constructible object of a work of truth, Badiou applies the

set-theoretical/topological term *cover* (*recouvrement*).⁶ Meanwhile, among the finite elements of the work, there is one that resists covering. It is the mark of the truth procedure—the test by a new political, aesthetic or scientific idea, the test by love of the new course of life and its outcomes—which Badiou suggests calling *the index of the absolute* or *the index* for short (*L'immanence Des Vérités* 516-517).

The work of truth helps us to rethink the concept of the object and move from its critique towards a critique of the cover. As we can infer, the inversion due to which the object-construct inevitably turns into a waste product is a result of covering and not an absolute destiny and identity of all people's achievements. Meanwhile, it is important to take into account and understand the forces involved into covering and waste production.

The skepticism inherent in Lacan's evaluation of the possible consequences of the event informs the attempts by many prominent Lacanian scholars, such as Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek, to mitigate the discrepancy between Lacan and Badiou regarding this concept. For instance, In "The Fifth Condition," Zupančič makes a series of terminological substitutions through which she eventually renders Badiou's thesis as its opposite. Precisely, first, she recognizes in Nietzsche's concept of *the death of God* a proclamation of the establishing event for modernity—the end of the Master's discourse or "the destitution of the authority of the One"—God, source and symbol of power, monarchy, system of beliefs (Zupančič 194-196). According to Zupančič, Lacan became *the true subject* who kept on inquiring into the consequences of this event in the form of what he dubs *the Analyst's discourse*. In other words, psychoanalysis emerges as the discipline that attempts to take into account an errant breach, a void that establishes the modern—capitalist, scientific, secular—discourse in contrast to the fixed symbolic place of the Unity associated with the supreme Being in premodern times.

However, Zupančič refrains from mentioning that 1) Lacan's theory of discourses

includes four of them—the discourses of the Master, Analyst, Hysteric and University, 2) in modern times, the Master’s discourse is replaced by the University’s discourse (universal knowledge, rationality) in the function of the dominant, and 3) despite the latter, all four discourses coexist in the same historical period (modernity).⁷ Given this implicit umbrella topic of the four discourses, we may establish that Zupančič’s actual intention is to equate the Badiouian event to the event of the change of discourses.

Neither of her three assumptions is consistent with Badiou’s argument in the following sense. First, *the death of God* is a negative term which refers to the end, the termination of something instead of naming a positive event, i.e. a new beginning; the intervention of a new present, a new possibility. Second, *the event* is reducible to neither the historical change of the discourse of an epoch nor the change of particular discourses, such as intellectual trends, political ideologies etc. Events occur in the four areas that Badiou identifies as conditions for philosophy, while neither *the death of God* nor the “destitution of the One” can be related to any of them in particular. The events related to politics, love, art and science are neither interdependent nor derivative of some general event.

Third, Badiou’s critique of the category of the One or oneness is based on the mathematical theory of sets and concerns only ontology and consequently philosophy. Zupančič implies that the very possibility of speaking of multiplicities and the end of the power of the One has been opened up by a change of discourse. It follows from her interpretation that, rather than embodying the consequences of an event in the mathematics of the nineteenth century, Cantor’s set theory just echoed a revolution in ideology. However, it is equally inconsistent to think that Cantor’s introduction of this theory reflected, or was determined by, a global epochal discursive event as it is to assume that it could unleash forces capable of undermining the established order. It is true that in *Being and Event*, Badiou associates set theory with ontology and proclaims mathematics the pure thinking of being qua being. He insists that set

theory is the most comprehensive and consistent *presentation* of being. However, he also points out that 1) set theory implies an insoluble dualism concerning the possibility of constructible and non-constructible (generic) sets, and 2) set theory does not suffice for thinking the event. In other words, although set theory informs Badiou's conceptualization of the historical situation in terms of multiples (being as it is presented by the concept of set), it neither reflects this situation as *historical* nor, of course, creates it. In a very precise sense, the most prominent implementations derivative of set theory—in cybernetics, data science and statistics—grant support to modern technocracy and bureaucracy and are favorable to conservative, reactionary, counter-revolutionary representations of social dynamics. Along with Badiou's recommendation “to sharply separate each truth procedure from the cultural ‘historicity’ wherein opinion presumes to dissolve it” (Badiou, *Saint Paul* 6), we should maintain that the event of set theory that occurred during the accelerating expansion of technologies and technological media opened up new possibilities, although it did not itself result from the preexisting conditions.

Despite Zupancic's desire to associate psychoanalysis with Badiouian truths, in reality psychoanalytic discourse more often provides means for the repression and ‘occultation’ of truths. As we mentioned above, psychoanalysis is inherently skeptical about the value of the subject's truth and interprets it as the obscene meaning of the symptom. Psychoanalytic interpretations are also associated with the operation of the inversion of values. Due to the internal censorship of unconscious desire, every affect experienced by the patient, every term in their speech or image in a dream can mean something opposite—e.g. the expression of kind regards can disguise animosity, etc. Freud extended this understanding to the general level of cultural values and assumed that in particular all sublime symbols—of the sacred, the beautiful, or god—result from the sublimation of base motives. In the same vein, Lacan opposes his theory of the object to the philosophical concept of the absolute. Finally, although admittedly

Lacan never identified the two, by its primary focus on sexuality, psychoanalysis contributes to the general tendency to confuse it with love. Badiou identifies this confusion as covering over the truth of love (see below).

Let us define the place of information and computation technologies in this tendency towards the ‘occultation’ or covering of truths.

In the book on St. Paul, Badiou argues that “[t]he contemporary world is... doubly hostile to truth procedures”—in the way it puts into interdependent play “abstract homogeneity of capital and identitarian protest” (9-12). Precisely, the former refers to

the world finally *configured*... as a market, as a world-market. This configuration imposes the rule of an abstract homogenization. Everything that circulates falls under the unity of a count, while inversely, only what lets itself be counted in this way can circulate. Moreover, this is the norm that illuminates a paradox few have pointed out: in the hour of generalized circulation and the phantasm of instantaneous cultural communication, laws and regulations forbidding the circulation of persons are being multiplied everywhere... [C]apitalist monetary abstraction is certainly a singularity, but a singularity *that has no consideration for any singularity whatsoever*: singularity as indifferent to the persistent infinity of existence as it is to the eventual becoming of truths (9-10).

In capitalism, evaluation coincides with quantification. As a result, the unquantifiable singularity of human life does not fit well within the system of economic rationality. With the promotion of digital technologies such as software, virtual reality and AI, the imposition of the logic of the waste product becomes ubiquitous in the following peculiar sense. As media ecologists (Crawford, Cubitt, Hogan, Pasek) point out, in the public imagination popular images of immaterial, clean, and intellectual technologies are dissociated from the reality of the enormous quantities of energy

consumed by labs and data centers, the huge carbon footprint left by the extraction and delivery technologies involved, lithium and cobalt poisoning, digital waste, illegal components of supply chains, the ruthless exploitation of low-cost labor in the third world (children's labor included), etc. In terms of Lacanian theory, all these issues that unambiguously refer to the systemic disregard of the generic human condition represent the obscene truth/underside of the idealized technological object. From a slightly different angle, individuals and large groups of people become the victims, and in a sense the waste products of algorithmic inequality and racism (Nobles, Eubanks). Badiou puts the capitalist system's insensitivity to truths into correlation with its indifference to this singularity of human lives. Further, he adds,

On the other side, there is a process of fragmentation into closed identities, and the culturalist and relativist ideology that accompanies this fragmentation... Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action; identities, moreover, that never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market. The capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities form an articulated whole.

This articulation plays a constraining role relative to every truth procedure. It is organically *without truth* (10-11).

The so-called "culture wars" and "cancel culture" that overwhelm the contemporary mainstream media and social platforms relentlessly exploit exactly this topic of identities. Although people's struggle for justice always concerns real issues, media tend to render it a spectacle: they fictionalize and repurpose it as a new instrument of oppression and censorship. Badiou frames capitalist identity politics as entirely consistent with its indifference to identities when it comes to the market laws that

govern the circulation of values. He develops his criticism of “culturalist and relativist ideology” in the following passage where the term *cover* occurs for the first time:

The symptom of this hostility is produced through nominal covers [*recouvrements*]: where the name of a truth procedure should obtain, another, which represses it, holds sway. The name ‘culture’ comes to obliterate that of ‘art.’ The word ‘technology’ obliterates the word ‘science.’ The word ‘management’ [*gestion*; administration] obliterates the word ‘politics.’ The word ‘sexuality’ obliterates love. The ‘culture-technology-management-sexuality’ system, which has the immense merit of being homogeneous to the market, and all of whose terms designate a category of commercial presentation, constitutes the modern nominal cover of the ‘art-science-politics-love’ system, which identifies truth procedures typologically (12; translation modified).

In more technical terms, Badiou is talking about a powerful global tendency both to represent and repurpose these four areas as subsets and derivatives of the capitalist economy and its ideology of administration. Given the expansion of computerization and digitalization in the corresponding spheres, perhaps *technology* becomes more and more applicable as an umbrella-term for the system at issue.

Moreover, the dominant technologies perfectly demonstrate the most direct meaning of the set-theoretic term *cover* and therefore provide the best support for Badiou’s argument. For instance, in a sense, what data science calls *raw data* can be considered an object/a set without apparent structure. Another similar example from the area of digital technologies would be the analog signal—light, sound, or pressure—before it is processed/digitized. In NLP (Natural Language Processing), the human voice, along with oral and written speech, are considered to be without structure prior to their algorithmic or neural-network-based recognition. One of the most recent and ambitious developments in this area, OpenAI’s model of human language GPT-3

(Generative Pre-trained Transformer-3), consists of 175 billion parameters that artificial intelligence applies to both the recognition and generation of human speech.⁸ This huge number both refers to, and replaces, the raw/analog uncountable multiplicity of unprocessed linguistic material. The basic assumption behind all these technologies is that the phenomena they attempt to simulate, i.e. intelligence, language, and knowledge, are constructible.

In turn, the anticipation that the difference between nature and technology is only quantitative inspires the simulation hypothesis promoted in the 1980s by physicist Richard Feynman and in the 2000s popularized by Nick Bostrom. Feynman considered the scenario according to which the evolution of computer technologies can eventually lead to a singularity where simulation will completely replicate reality. In the sense that the universe is thinkable as a quantum computer (Feynman, Susskind), technology can be considered the most fundamental category of cosmology and ontology.

Consequently, *constructibility* is a general and more formal term for technological reproducibility too. During the period from the 1930 to the 1950s, Alan Turing and Alonzo Church developed the general concept of computability and the computable task, which implied that every task representable through a finite series of elementary operations such as registering, erasing and permuting binary-coded data can have a technological realization. From this angle, Badiou's cover also becomes synonymous with the technological interpretation of political, scientific and artistic tasks as well as amorous relations. Indeed, quite successful experiments with the automated generation of poems, literary fiction, paintings, classical and popular music by unsupervised neural networks have been conducted during the last decade. In the majority of tests, audiences could not distinguish the AI-generated pieces from the others. Also, with the ubiquitous use of big data analysis in scientific research, it becomes more and more difficult to define which scientific achievements—for instance, the black holes images

generated from the data acquired by the Event Horizon Telescope (2015-2022) or the human genome annotation by the Human Genome Project (1984-2022)—should be credited to scientists rather than coders and AI. When it comes to politics, we witness a process of massive reinterpretation in terms of algorithms and data of the categories related to political will, consensus, choice, decision and ideology. Social networks create favorable conditions for the ideological profiling of their users and their targeting by political advertising. Neural networks are trained to recognize extremist views and activity on the internet. Social platforms widely implement the means of algorithmic censorship. Policy-making fundamentally relies on the algorithmic representation of the economic situation and public opinion. Finally, computerization offers solutions for amorous relations too. According to a recent study, by 2009 in the USA the number of same-sex couples who first met online exceeded 60% and was 22% for heterosexual couples.⁹ Since then, by 2017, the latter number had doubled.¹⁰ The consumer-oriented solutions include the algorithmic love-match search, which can involve highly sophisticated statistical methods and data analysis technologies. Popular social networks provide users with the possibility to inform the general audience about changes in the status of personal relationships. Special tags, heart emojis, the animated templates for romantic messages and sentimental slideshows auto-generated from profile photos become standard means of communicating feelings to romantic partners. Automated important-date reminders assist in being a mindful partner.

However, the breach that divides a human being from true creative subjectivity is neither technological in nature, nor can it be eliminated by computation or any other technological means. Therefore, it is important to point out the crucial difference between Badiou's concept of cover and the more popular Heideggerian concept of technics. In a sense, by speaking in terms of cover, Badiou attempts to refute the Heideggerian doxa concerning the fusion of science and technology as well as Heidegger's dictum that science does not think Being. In *Being and Event*, Badiou argues that

it is exactly science—mathematics—that thinks being qua being. Also, he maintains that mathematics grants the presentation of Being both as constructible and generic, whereas Heideggerians associate the former with science as technics and the latter with poetry. Moreover, love and politics have as much access to Being as poetry or science. Therefore, Badiou’s argument undermines the concept of the union of science and technology as well as the alleged unity of the “technological” perspective regarding Being provided by mathematics. The possibility of both constructible and generic sets proves that the mathematical perspective is inherently dual.

Heidegger famously proclaimed the question of technology fundamentally obscure. However, there is no consensus among scholars about the meaning of this term *obscure*. While some consider technology the transcendental condition of our experience and cognition (Hansen, Ihde, Stiegler, Kittler), others prefer a more direct interpretation and explore hidden material infrastructures behind a piece of technology as final product (Farman, Hu, Peters, Pickren)—such as extraction technologies, power plants and power-line grids, pipelines, underground cable systems as well as labor markets and supply chains. The representatives of tech discourse (Christensen, Dyson, Kelly, Kurzweil, Shirky, Wong) basically ignore the fundamental uncertainty of our relationship with technology—our existential and ontological connection with it—and operate with fictionalized scenarios inspired by the theory of evolution, neuroscience, systems theory, etc. instead. Although Stiegler addresses the obliteration by philosophy of the question of technics and reasonably associates this intellectual bias with resentment and denial (*Verleugnung*) conceptualized by Nietzsche and Freud respectively (Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 1 x), his thesis that technics or technology is the horizon of the possible, futurities and Being does not hold in the following precise sense. Technics does not establish the boundary line for the generic extensions of present ontological situations. In particular, technics neither hosts nor translates, exteriorizes, or mediates the incorporation of/into the tacit truths of love, art, politics and

science. The latter are unique and irreplaceable procedures through which the genuine horizons of all possibilities and futurities can be defined and validated. Meanwhile, a truth procedure can certainly be interpreted as a set of the techniques/technics invented and required in the course of evaluation. The observable history and trends of technological development reveal the infinite forces and resources of finitization and covering. Although they certainly determine the embodiment and the scope of possibilities for human/posthuman beings, they cannot be reliable sources for the evaluation of collective and individual life in general, nor can they predict its eventual outcomes.

Chapter 2

Does the Digital Kill Metaphor?

The Lacanian Metaphor

In 1957, Lacan introduced a concept of metaphor which he later applied to several issues and most prominently to the analysis of psychosis. Since Aristotle, for twenty-four centuries, metaphor has been regarded as a rhetoric trope and a poetic figure. Only in the middle of the twentieth century, after Roman Jakobson had correlated it with the synchronic axis of relations between the elements in language, the theoretical understanding of metaphor has become decisively extended and deepened. Along with the structural linguistic interpretation of metaphor as a term-for-term substitution, Jakobson demonstrated that one very general type of aphasia—usually resulting from brain damage, an inability to understand or/and produce speech—affects the subject's capacity to comprehend exactly this type of relation in spoken and written discourse. In turn, Jakobson's intervention into the field of psychiatry inspired Lacan to elaborate a systemic vision of the role of metaphor in the unconscious. Thus, since the 20th century, fundamental linguistic and psychoanalytic perspectives on metaphor complemented its classical aesthetic and rhetorical concepts. With Lacan, metaphor became a prism through which not only psychoanalysts but also cultural theorists

could analyze human subjectivity and the work of the unconscious both concerning clinical cases and in respect of culture in general.

Many studies have provided detailed explanations of sources and theoretical reasons from which Lacan's concept of metaphor crystallized, as well as revealing its limitations and historic conditions of possibility. However, it is difficult to find as many, if any, works that would introduce a media-historic approach to this Lacanian topic. By this moment, F. Kittler's works still represent the most recognized media-archaeologic study of Lacanian concepts in general. Given that Lacan proclaimed the Symbolic—language, speech, discourse, communication—the main determinant of the unconscious, the question of the medium in its historic dimension and as a condition of possibility of psychoanalytic ideas is inevitable. We assume that the concept of metaphor can become an excellent object of such a study. If, according to Kittler, “media determine our situation” (Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* xxxix), then it is fair to question the conditioning of metaphor in the Lacanian understanding of it, i.e., to question the conditions in which something like the Lacanian metaphor can take place. Specifically, this questioning seems very reasonable in the context of digital media that now determine our intellectual situation and distinguish it from Lacan's.

The research we are proposing in this chapter combines what might be called *the archaeology* (in a broad sense) and *pharmacology* (in the Stieglerian sense) of *metaphor*. The main question of this study is: Does the digital affect the conditions of the possibility of the Lacanian metaphor? The answer we are giving here shows that digital media and the technologies on which such media are based are biased regarding metaphor in the Lacanian sense and that this bias consists in a tendency to eliminate inconsistency as a fundamental condition of metaphor.

Let us lay out our basic assumptions concerning Lacan's concept.

First, every metaphor is possible only in so far as it is a metaphor in the Lacanian

sense that we will be gradually unfolding below. Perhaps, this is an assumption that is explicitly or implicitly shared by most Lacanian scholars. Bruce Fink provides a well-elaborated canonical vision of the concept (Fink, *A Clinical Introduction; Lacan to the Letter; The Lacanian Subject*). An exception is Russel Grigg's critique which is mostly dedicated to portraying the Lacanian metaphor as only a particular type of metaphor (Grigg), and, therefore, it is inconsistent with Lacan's general strategy of making metaphor—or what he defines as such—a determinant of communication in analysis. The following passage illustrates Lacan's definitive position concerning the importance of metaphor for analysis and inspires many of our further arguments concerning the topology of the medium and metaphor as a link between the body and the signifier:

What is at issue is to refind—in the laws that govern this other scene (*ein anderer Schauplatz*), which Freud, on the subject of dreams, designates as the scene of the unconscious—the effects that are discovered at the level of the chain of materially unstable elements that constitutes language: effects that are determined by the double play of combination and substitution in the signifier, according to the two axes for generating the signified, metonymy and metaphor; effects that are determinant in instituting the subject. In the process, a topology, in the mathematical sense of the term, appears, without which one soon realizes that it is impossible to even note the structure of a symptom in the analytic sense of the term (Lacan, *Ecrits* 578).

Also, the Lacanian metaphor is more inclusive than it is in rhetoric or poetry. In the Lacanian sense, metaphor is a symbolic device that accounts for the incompleteness of the Other and stabilizes the subject's relationship with the Other. In addition to the general understanding, it includes witticisms, insults, nicknames (implicitly, personal names too), condensation (in the Freudian sense), or/and dreams

(as metaphors of desire (512)), (psychic) symptoms, and the paternal metaphor which terminates the child's Oedipal complex. Since the paternal metaphor is the earliest occurrence and, in a certain sense, the quintessential example of metaphor in everyone's life, this is its schematic description to which our further discourse will recur: the paternal metaphor breaks the incestuous continuum of the mother-child bond and unconditionally forbids the primordial phantasmic unity (723); it introduces into one's life a dimension of the inappropriate which thereafter becomes a normative mode for the articulation of desire (*Seminar XVII* 112; *Écrits* 698); it introduces the principle of separation between the subject and the object which thereby acquires the status of the object of desire (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 55); it introduces phallogocentric narcissism as the principle of coordination between the symbolic and the naïve (biological) body (Lacan, *Écrits* 463, 537, 581; *Autres écrits* 409); in short, it becomes the first and foremost symbolic device which guides one through inconsistencies imposed on us by language / the symbolic / culture.

Second, the possibility of the Lacanian metaphor cannot be taken for granted. We believe that this conclusion is consistent with everything Lacan has taught about this trope. Lacan's theory of psychosis undermined the assumption that metaphor is always possible: in terms of the concept of the paternal metaphor, metaphor is a privilege that a paranoiac cannot afford. The topic of the possibility/impossibility of metaphor is very rarely covered in psychoanalytic applications to cultural and media studies; the only relatively relevant discussions are those that extrapolate from the Lacanian understanding of psychoses to the issues brought about by mass media and late capitalism. As a rule, no media-deterministic hypothesis concerning the Lacanian metaphor is ever explicitly proposed. The works by Jean-Michel Vappereau (Vappereau, *Essaim; Étoffe; Noeud*) are a rare exception for this rule, and generally, the question of media and technologies as conditions of possibility of the Lacanian metaphor is still dramatically underdeveloped.

Third, the Lacanian metaphor can and should be studied as an object and precisely as a specific medium that connects individuals in a group. It is always addressed to someone able to interpret it and recognize an intention manifested in it. Cultural and media theorists mostly discuss metaphors from the angle of meaning rather than metaphor as a signifier and a means of establishing and maintaining a social link between subjects. Clint Burnham (Burnham et al.; Mukherjee) and Jacob Johanssen (Johanssen) brilliantly apply Lacanian terminology, including *metaphor*, to the analysis of new media thereby implicitly confirming that metaphor can be a rhetorical device mediating our experience of, and interactions with, the digital. On different theoretical grounds, analogous considerations of metaphors as cognitive tools are specific to M. Hansen (Hansen) and A. Galloway (Galloway). In other words, it is silently admitted that metaphorization is still possible and that metaphors are propping up the discourses related to digital media. Meanwhile, we argue that the paradigm of digital-media-based communication may be incompatible with the possibility to establish a type of collectivity favourable for the proper functioning of metaphors. Thus, a study of the Lacanian metaphor must reaffirm and reintroduce the elements of the social link made possible by metaphor.

We call *the Lacanian metaphor* a very precisely outlined phenomenon accessible via analytic communication, though not exclusively. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, every symptom is a metaphor (Lacan, *Ecrits* 439). However, metaphor in this sense is meaningful only provided that the Lacanian paradigm of communication in the analysis is viable. To talk about metaphor together with Lacan is, to a great degree, to speak in terms of post-Saussurian linguistics, i.e., using such notions as *signifier* and *signified*, *language* and *speech*, *synchrony* and *diachrony*, whereas many contemporary theorists regard such discourse as being out of fashion. Moreover, the digitalization and automatization of communication could have already dramatically transformed the meaning and, probably, even the identity of most of these terms. For instance,

the following note by Stiegler explicitly points out a discord between the Saussurian understanding of language and a *neurocentric* cognitivist model implemented in digital technologies:

Founded as they are on the calculability of the audience market, and on an economy of attention that destroys this very attention, the culture industries are now being replaced in the age of disruption by the ‘data economy,’ which can only intensify barbarism qua finitization of this infinite—on the basis of Noam Chomsky’s neurocentric gesture, replacing Cartesian ideas with neuronal ‘wiring,’ thus erasing the question of idiomaticity that fundamentally arises from exosomatization as ex-expression, and liquidating the Saussurian dynamic of diachronic and synchronic tendencies as that through which idioms are metastabilized (Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption* 302).

We will go on to show that the here-mentioned metastabilization of idioms through the “dynamic of diachronic and synchronic tendencies” has a direct relation to the problem of metaphor. The mediation by the digital affects both language and our ways to handle and comprehend it, and, in the pre-digital time, Lacan’s approach has been one of these ways. It is in this sense that we need to question whether the digital is a condition of possibility of the Lacanian metaphor or rather an obstacle to it.

Conditions of the Lacanian Metaphor: Formal Aspect

To try to account for the tendencies in the relationship between techno-science and culture is to pursue the logic of the subject which has also always stirred psychoanalytic interest. Historically, the Lacanian subject originates in a link between technology and science, the link characteristic for the modern civilization and prominent due to mathematization of scientific language, on the one hand, and the perpetual perfection

of the means of data registration, storing, representation, processing, and transmission on the other. Intrinsically, the modern subject has a logical-mathematical foundation in so far as the origins of techno-rationality converge with the origins of mathematical rationality. Extrinsically, the modern subject is determined by tools that extend human senses, exteriorize brain functions or cognitive faculties, and mediate communication.

According to Lacan, the birth of this subject has also been the birth of the unconscious in the sense in which Freud conceptualized it (Lacan, *Ecrits* 726-729). Freud's intuition led him to conclude that the unconscious elements of pathological behaviours and psychical states are consistent with a scientific explanation, that is, that there is no fundamental difference between the unconscious subject and the scientific subjectivity in the terms of which the unconscious can and must be articulated. Meanwhile, when it comes to the practice of analysis that he elaborated, it is hard to ignore that empirically the setup of the analytic session concerned, in the first place, a special configuration of aural and visual means of communication between the analyst and the patient. For, while lying on the couch in the analyst's consulting room, the patient cannot see the analyst whom they were addressing; the speech, the voice could be isolated from the gaze; and thus such a pivotal stage as the transference to the analyst can be achieved. The actualization of the subject-analyst and the subject-analysand is conditioned by a very specific link between the symbolic medium of speech, the aural medium of the voice, and the visual medium of the gaze (Vappereau, *Noeud* iii-iv). Moreover, in more media-materialistic terms, the analytic session is a specific assemblage of the analyst's notetaking means plus acoustic and optical parameters of the room—its soundproofing and illumination. Freud elaborated detailed recommendations for it. Thus, if in psychoanalytic theory the unconscious found its translation to the language of scientific rationality, then in the psychoanalytic setting this unconscious becomes a subject of rationality dictated by the medium.

Let us now propose a concise explanation of the terms connecting the logical-mathematical foundations with the psychoanalytic theory of metaphor and with the question of the medium. Our further commentary will explain three general points: 1) existence of the Other is a necessary condition of possibility of metaphor; 2) the medium is the ultimate condition of possibility of the Other provided that there is a diversity of media; 3) therefore, a diversity of media is a condition of possibility of metaphor.

Regarding the foundations of mathematics, set theory represents the most general theory of mathematical objects, while logic is often associated with formal mathematical language, and topology is understood as a theory of simplest structures. Thus, in the course of exploring the logical-mathematical foundations of the psychoanalytic subject, let us distinguish between the logical and topological aspect of the otherness. Let us also admit *consistency* as fundamental priority and value for logic, and *continuity* as a regulative idea for topology. Taken in the logical sense, the Lacanian subject's being emerges in a gap between tautology and antinomy. Tautology is always consistent but uninformative and requires no cognitive effort, whereas antinomy is a form of the logically impossible or unthinkable. Logically, all language expressions are either tautologies or antinomies. Therefore, only an expression whose status is not yet defined can excite thinking. Obviously, the reason for such logical non-transparency can only be the medium, the signifier in its material or purely external form relative to thinking. The signifier represents the dimension of the Other and ties the subject to it. In a metaphor, two semantically inconsistent signifiers are identified. To the degree to which a metaphor is irreducible to synonymy (tautology) or absurdity (antinomy), the dimension of the Other is sustained.

In the previous paragraph, the figure of dimension is irrelevant to logic. It belongs to topology but was necessitated by the admission of the irreducible presence of the signifier in the realm of thinking. Topology supports a subtle distinction between the

intrinsic and extrinsic structures of the signifier. For example, concerning a spoken language, the system of differential relations between phonemes, the system of signs, and the rules of their composition can stand for the intrinsic structure, while the difference between speech and writing belongs to the extrinsic properties. As one can reasonably conclude, since it consists in this intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy, the topological aspect of the otherness is achievable merely by introducing the extrinsic type of relation. It is important to highlight that with topology we are only analytically specifying the formal properties of the signifier; we are not leaving the domain of signifiers and mediation to start exploring physical, psychological, or other empirical aspects of the medium. These are other possible examples of extrinsic differences: time-biased vs space-biased media (Innis), hot vs cool media (McLuhan), acoustic vs optical vs symbolic media (Kittler), texts vs images vs systems (Galloway), etc.¹¹

We see that the topological aspect of the otherness brought about by the signifier is conditioned by diversity in the medium. The diversity necessitates practical knowledge of how a medium can be linked to another medium. Reading is an example of linking space-biased writing to time-biased speech. Sound-recording or minute-taking is an example of an inverse-order linking. Kittler's studies of discourse networks (Kittler, *Discourse Networks*) and Stiegler's analysis of signification (*signi-fiance*; sic) (Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption* 207-219) provide a good perspective on knowledge and techniques of linking diverse media. When Lacan was introducing his theory of metaphor, he certainly intuited the extrinsic logic of relations between signifiers. In "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," after defining the signifier in terms of differential elements, he moves to "the signifying chain" which he defines as a "topological substratum" of signifiers' interconnections:

The second property of the signifier, that of combining according to the laws of a closed order, affirms the necessity of the topological substratum, of which the term I ordinarily use, "signifying chain," gives an approximate

idea: links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links (Lacan, *Ecrits* 418).

This passage is immediately preceded by a note implying that a prior development of typography by the late XIX century provided support to “the decisive discovery of linguistics” consisting in the supposition of a “synchronic system of differential couplings” that articulate phonemes in speech. He asserts that typefaces rendered “validly present . . . the essentially localized structure of the signifier” (418). These considerations concerning the technological mediation of mapping phonemes to letters prepare Lacan’s further definition of metaphor as a substitution of one signifier in the signifying chain by another (421-435); so, we are inferring that that definition necessitated a prior articulation of both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of the difference proper to the signifier.

Because Lacan insists that metaphor concerns relations between signifiers only, this means that the substituting and the substituted terms in metaphor must be considered as being extrinsically foreign to each other. We would like to take advantage of the image of a necklace proposed by Lacan and to explain how its intrinsic topology is different from the extrinsic topology. Let us consider a simpler object only consisting of two rings linked together. An intrinsic topological analysis would ignore the presence of one of the rings because there is no continuous transition from one ring to another, or—speaking in more intuitive terms—because the rings do not have common parts. Thus, because intrinsically two rings can be described by identical equations—for instance, as a circumference or a torus,—their number and linking are irrelevant: the only object here is a ring that can be distinguished, for example, from a sphere. However, extrinsically, the two linked rings correspond to an object called *Hopf link* which belongs to a completely different branch of mathematical topology—knot theory studying knots, links and braids. In Hopf link, one ring can be considered a signifier for another one not necessarily because it looks the same but mostly because

it articulates two distinctive features of a ring—a closed contour that it cannot leave and the central hole through which the rings are linked.¹² Lacan’s idea for his *chain* is obvious: intrinsically there is nothing in signifiers that could provide signification, but extrinsically their linking is what creates signification. As an element of a signifying chain, the metaphoric term can substitute for some virtual part of the chain. For example, in “His father is a lion,” *lion* abbreviates a whole sequence of attributive statements about the father’s personal qualities and achievements. Conventionally, it connotes rather than denotes bravery, nobility and imperiousness, i.e., the qualities that only poetically can be attributed to real lions. Thus, the metaphoric term, in the first place, emphasizes the medium connecting alternative chains.

Metaphors in their general understanding are symbolic devices that represent a link between the purely verbal medium and a non-verbal medium. For example, in the metaphor “You are my Moon and my stars,” this linking is explicit as *you* is a term of interpersonal relations expressible only verbally, whereas Moon and stars are visual objects representable by images. In some cases, like “having one in the oven,” both a metaphor and a metaphorized term—a fetus in this example—can refer to a perceptual given, but even such metaphors are always aimed at conveying something generically symbolic—in this case, pregnancy and the prospect of motherhood. However, the exteriority of signifiers in a metaphor is more evident from the psychoanalytic examples than from the poetic metaphors for which, in most cases, a signified-oriented explication can be post-factum invented. One of Lacan’s definitions convincingly portrays metaphor as a link between heterogeneous instances within an individual psyche: “The relation [rapport] of the organ of language to the speaking being is metaphor” (*Autres écrits* 476). According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the meeting of the body and language brings about the symptom as a symbolic formation. A somatically presented symptom replaces a psychic trace—a repressed memory, a psychic trauma—which is in a completely different relation to the body as a medium

and to more recent events that could have reactivated that trace and triggered the symptom formation:

Metaphor's two-stage mechanism is the very mechanism by which symptoms, in the analytic sense, are determined. Between the enigmatic signifier of sexual trauma and the term it comes to replace in a current signifying chain, a spark flies that fixes in a symptom—a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element—the signification, that is inaccessible to the conscious subject, by which the symptom may be dissolved (*Écrits* 431).

Finally, in analysis, the symptom is linked to the medium of speech by which, eventually, a patient is supposed to find relief. The irreducible otherness in the medium (the body and its functions) in its relation to another medium (speech) is what makes the symptom what it is: a puzzle, a rebus, a metaphor. The Lacanian metaphor is first and foremost the relation of a medium to another medium.

Having formally redefined the Lacanian metaphor and its conditions of possibility, we may discuss how digital media and technology could affect these conditions.

Consistence, Elimination of the Other

Lacan says that, in psychosis, the ideal of personal excellence or the ego-ideal takes the place of the Other. Something similar is going on in our relations with digital technologies. Computers embody our ideals of information processing, and although they may be considered as only completing us where we are usually lacking precision, concentration, productivity and speed, in many significant areas we rely on them rather than on people. For many people, fact-checking and comparing the information received from other people with the information from the internet has become habitual. In short, in the digital age, the ego-ideal is substantially tied to electronic

computation. Yet, at the same time, in our lives, computers and computer networks have mostly replaced the Other—a “treasure trove of signifiers” as Lacan often defined it—since digital databases and internet communities are becoming the main sources of our erudition and both active and passive vocabulary. Lacan’s formula predicts that the combination of the functions of the Other and the ego-deal, the functioning of the digital Other as the ego-ideal, can engender individual and, probably, social consequences compatible with the Lacanian description of psychosis.

Stiegler’s *The Age of Disruption* is an in-depth study of issues such as ordinary madness and social psychosis. He argues that the informatization of modern societies has caused the global destruction of pre-existing intergenerational and intragenerational communication circuits that could counterbalance the totalizing dependence of humanity on technologies and generate the knowledge necessary for accommodation to technologies, which are also “the knowledge of how to live, do and conceptualize” (Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption* 39). Stiegler associates these three aspects of knowledge with three planes: the plane of subsistence—the knowledge of how to live; the plane of existence—the practical knowledge of the social, technological and physical reality; and the plane of consistence—the knowledge of how to conceptualize, produce and transmit ideas. Stiegler literally equates the digital—or *disruption*, as he calls it—with madness and the loss of reason (38). He notes that the systemic madness evolves “through a confusion of the planes of subsistence, existence and consistence” (40). Remarkably, sixty years before Stiegler’s book, Lacan has warned the psychoanalytic and psychiatric community not only about the absence of an effective approach to social psychosis but also that such an approach would be incompatible with the ruling political-economic rationality, which combines a universalistic image of humanity, techno-scientific determinism and emancipatory ideology (Lacan, *Ecrits* 480).

The idea of confusion in the triad *subsistence, existence and consistence* echoes Lacan’s late revisions of his approach to psychosis in the seminar *The Sinthome* (1975-

1976). In that seminar, Lacan notes that, in paranoid psychosis, “the real, the symbolic and the imaginary are one and the same consistence” (*Seminar XXIII* 41); and we want to stress that this note implies a similarity between confusion and consistence, with the latter being understood as combining the meaning of *consisting* and *being consistent* (10). We think that this “one and the same consistence” which Lacan is talking about is equivalent to what Stiegler calls the plane of consistence, a notion formerly developed by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 35-60, *A Thousand Plateaus*). In Lacanian terms, such a plane, in which being and thinking merge, would exactly suppose elimination of all boundaries between the imaginary (which, in *The Sinthome*, in most cases is synonymous to *consistence*), on the one hand, and the real and the symbolic on the other. Although within Lacan’s theory, it is possible to talk about the imaginary of the real or the imaginary of the symbolic in a sense of being consistent of one or the other, it is also important to distinguish between the three consistencies, that is, to remember that the imaginary, the symbolic and the real do not *consist in* each other. Confusion between the three consistencies and “putting them into continuity” (*mise en continuité*) is what distinguishes the psychotic perspective.

In part, the condensation of two meanings—logical and ontological—in the term *consistence* is also a sign of confusion. Together, the logic and topology of the signifier imply a suspension of the formal criteria of consistency and continuity. Being in many respects in conflict with Lacan’s teaching, Deleuzian metaphysics promotes consistence as a logical-topological compound combining these criteria in an infinite virtual perspective of all-inclusive immanence. Thus, to reinstall the Lacanian truth of Stiegler’s formula, one has to admit that Stiegler’s subject is the consistence, existence and subsistence of the imaginary and that its not-confused, not-mad articulation requires an ex-sistence (exterior existence) of the real and the symbolic. In general, one can see that instead of directly attributing inconsistency to whatever they call

madness, paranoia, or psychosis, both Lacan and Stiegler are looking for a specific composition of the consistent/consisting with other elements of a situation.

Because of the above-mentioned ambiguity of the term *consistence*, in what follows we will mostly maintain a speculative distance between its logical and ontological aspects by narrowing the analysis of the relationship between the disruption and madness to only the element of logical consistency.

Doubtless, the supposition of consistency as a source of madness is counterintuitive. It is easier to imagine, though, that one's motivation for consistency can be abnormal. Generalizing this intuition, we might recall the two worrisome tendencies we mentioned in Introduction and associate with automation of intellectual tasks and control over their completion, such as desire to get rid of the responsibility for the symbolic tasks constitutive for the speaking subject—reading, writing, calculating—and for being reasonable. These two tendencies towards irresponsibility and irrationality are fully compatible with the dialectics of the symbolic and the imaginary identifications regulated by the ego-ideal. In Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalysis, the ego-ideal is a symbolic super-egoic instance that provides the individual with an ideal of perfection: the ego-ideal has no lack, it is an image of a complete subject in full possession of the object of desire. Lacan distinguishes the ego-ideal from the ideal ego, the latter being an imaginary position that the ego-ideal prescribes to the individual, or, in other words, an identity which one is supposed to accept provided that the ego-ideal had been properly assimilated. The ideal ego of the inhabitant of the digital age is to be connected to the computational power and informational abundance of the global network: one does not have to be intelligent and have broad erudition to meet the criteria imposed by the digital ideal of consistency.

As noted above, from the point of view of pure logic, there is a tautology in the heart of every consistency, and therefore, except tautology, language does not express any other valid knowledge. An analogous line of argumentation was made

famous by Wittgenstein whose discourse, in Lacan's words, embodies an extreme "psychotic ferocity" (Lacan, *Seminar XVII* 62) with which the author of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* purifies language from everything that might be related to the symbolic, i.e., from meaning, truth and subjectivity. Take the elementary form of every proposition expressing some knowledge representable as x is y . Because the quality of being true requires that what stands for x and y be the same, this form always communicates an intention of reducing x is y to x is x , that is, to a tautology, and hence supposes the elimination of a difference, of the otherness between the terms. In our example, this difference is maintained as the difference between two letters representing elementary signifiers. Until the difference is manifested by signifiers, there persists an uncertainty and a tautology cannot be confirmed.

Both the Lacanian subject and the Other can be identified on this fairly speculative level: while the uncertainty is the condition of the subject as the one for whom the truth of x is y is a question, the Other is exactly that virtual place where the answer is and where the truth of x is y is decidable simply because the Other is the source and storehouse of signifiers and the difference between them. The logical gap between two expressions provides the place for desire as the supposition of a reason, a cause and a meaning for their difference. Thus, being the bearer of the difference, the signifier introduces both the Other and the subject as the subject of desire (*Ecrits* 708-709). The ideal of consistency as tautology inspires the destruction of the dimension of the Other through a series of equations that would make all relations between signifiers explicit and explicable. This is basically what takes place in computation and algorithmization.

The elimination of the Other coincides with the elimination of the gap between the consistency of x is x and the unknown consistency or inconsistency of x is y so that the Other ceases to be anything else but an ideal symbolization with no blind spot, hiatus or lack. In this respect, it is exactly a lack in the Other which is determinative for the

Other, and this is something that the Lacanian psychotic is incapable of accepting. What Lacan calls *the paternal metaphor* symbolically authorizes the lack in the Other by introducing a law of desire. The paternal metaphor normalizes the subject of desire emerging with the difference introduced by the signifier; it gives a form and a place to the inconsistency or the failed consistency in the symbolic; whereas this metaphor's failure "sets off a cascade of reworkings of the signifier from which the growing disaster of the imaginary proceeds, until the level is reached at which signifier and signified stabilize in a delusional metaphor" (481). A delusional metaphor is what is left of reality for a psychotic.

A "growing disaster of the imaginary" is the Lacanian warning regarding "one and the same consistence" penetrating all areas of techno-civilization as it is taking place with informatization and telecommunication. However, a stabilization through a delusional metaphor is neither a guaranteed outcome nor, probably, even an achievable goal. What is normally understood by inter-individual and group communication corresponds to the imaginary axis of relations which Lacan distinguishes from the symbolic axis of communication between the subject and the Other. Therefore, "the disaster of the imaginary" refers not only to delirious ideas, but also to our growing connectivity and total involvement with communication, whose complexity does not cease to increase. Networks are the technological means to make everything consistent with everything. A historic precedent that can shed some light on this point is *Memoires of My Nervous Illness* published in 1903. Its author, Daniel Paul Schreber, who was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, portrays a world where every living and dead soul is wired to all others. Lacan's conclusions concerning the psychoses that we are discussing here are based on a thorough analysis of that book.

Today, among many other of its representations, the internet is imaginable in a Schreberian way as a network connecting the dead and the living. In this regard one should take into account various initiatives concerning what some call *postmortem*

social media, which deals with issues ranging from decisions concerning the future of the *Facebook* accounts of deceased users to the generation of postmortem posts by the services *LivesOn* and *Eterni.me*. In the light of this parallel between the logic of social media and the logic of a paranoid subject, the idea of a global network reveals the signs not only of an illusion but also of a delusion. However, the significant limitation of this parallel consists in the fact that a stabilization of the psychotic's discourse occurs in a specific controlled environment, whereas the hyper-connectivity is a technologically actualized psychotic discourse that has effectively become an environment.

From this angle, QAnon is a good example of a delusional metaphor for a global connection between power, money, publicity, privacy, sexuality, spirituality, Good and Evil. Like every conspiracy theory, it represents a bricolage of stereotypes, phobias and perverse phantasies compiled into a semi-apocalyptic semi-messianic message, and, at the same time, it reproduces the same set of signifiers trending in the mass media of the time—celebrities, politicians, scandals and other most-discussed events and issues—by uniting them in one total paranoid plane of consistence. To say the least, QAnon is just an alternative means to verbalize the message of the global network as a medium of all media.

Surprisingly, there is no contradiction between the swarming imaginary of “one and the same consistence” realized in the global computer network, on the one hand, and the image of a bubble—that is, technically, a sphere—introduced by Eli Pariser on the other. The filter bubble is viewed as an effect of the automated or algorithmic user's data processing, on the basis of which the web services heuristically optimize the search results and render personalized contents. As a result, the user has minimal chances to find and get to know something radically different from the information consistent with their previous searches and browsing history. Lamenting failed dreams of open information and limitless cooperation that the internet could have provided, Pariser simultaneously reestablishes an illusion of the beyond—beyond the filter bub-

ble's frontier—which he would prefer not to exist. We can interpret the problem of the filter bubble as an objection to the incongruence between the logical consistency provided by the algorithms and the virtual abundance of the web, that is, its consistence in the ontological sense. Doubtless, Pariser's criticism implies the necessity of acknowledging otherness when it comes to imagining internet communication as a means of expanding one's prior knowledge, reevaluating values and preferences. However, on another level, otherness is rejected, and we have to specify how.

Connoting enclosure and boundaries between inside and outside, the figure of the filter bubble can be opposed to the image of a net, or a web, which has no such connotations. In terms of formal representation, for example, geometrical or topological, a bubble can be represented based on its intrinsic properties as a two-dimensional object whose parts are in particular relation to each other; as well, it can be represented based on its extrinsic properties as a surface separating an interior three-dimensional space from the exterior three-dimensional space. According to mathematicians, such intrinsic and extrinsic representations are mutually incommensurable. Unlike a bubble, a web has no properties that would not have an intrinsic representation. As rhizomatic as it can get, the web is a figure of immanence or consistence in the Deleuzian sense. By admitting an infinite self-differentiating plane of immanence, Deleuze's metaphysics admits the intrinsic Other. As for the extrinsic Other, it simply cannot be conceived in network terms. The critique of the filter bubble rhetorically opposes the "bad" inside-outside dichotomy to a "good" intellectual freedom and diversity; but it fails to see that thereby it represses the signifier of the difference between the intrinsic and the extrinsic.

To conclude this section, the logic of the technological realization of consistency/consistence excludes the possibility of metaphor. The legitimacy of metaphor requires a functional dimension of the Other, but, as we see, the Other is replaced with an ideal of computation which leaves no place for the double inconsistency of the signifier.

The Name of the Father and the Media Link

The arrival of social media added concerns to the polemics on political correctness, politeness, censorship. Some reactionary minds argue that contemporary techniques and technologies of communication have favoured a phenomenon such as *feeling offended*, which has become a widespread cliché referring to an indefinite range of situations in which someone's verbal or non-verbal act can be interpreted as offensive by somebody else. Perhaps, in the first place, its critics suspect that *feeling-offended* declaration degenerated into a pure performative act or an empty gesture. Theoretically, an expression or an act becomes an insult depending on context; but in practice this potentiality sometimes turns out to be intolerable for the people who declare themselves offended in situations when no one would intend or anticipate that. Semantically, insults are always connotative rather than denotative. Feeling offended is based on turning connotation into denotation and on the elimination of all other contexts except the one in which an insult is an insult. It is a form of intrinsic elimination of the Other.

The intolerance to actual or virtual insults is an intolerance to metaphor. Yet, it is relevant to the ambivalence of humour, because, to a greater or lesser extent, every insult is witty and every witticism is degrading to particular people. Take *doorknob* in its function as insult as an example. Definitely, it is a metaphor whose interpretation reveals it as being a condensed witticism: when someone says: "She's a doorknob," they mean that the referent is a promiscuous person with whom "everyone gets a turn." Perhaps, nicknames can be the best example of metaphors having an appearance of insults but functioning as proper names provided a proper ironic distance. Often, nicknames begin as insults, but after entering the internal code of a group, they are rarely used offensively. Jokes, nicknames and insults draw a symbolic boundary between the interior and the exterior of a community which shares the figurative language in question. For instance, *Snips* is a nickname familiar to *Star Wars*:

The Clone Wars fans—this outlines the first boundary—and referring to an adorable character named Ahsoka Tano. It is noteworthy that, among all people in Ahsoka's circle, only her teacher, who gave her this nickname, could call her that; and this is the second boundary. Thus, *Snips* condenses the meaning of the most exclusive relationship and commonality between the two, and its metanarrative function is to foreshadow the tragedy of their final breakup.

In the light of these examples that illustrate the relationship between metaphor, on the one hand, and insults, witticisms and nicknames on the other, Lacan's suggestions on witticisms in *Formations of the Unconscious* can be extrapolated to a broader scope of phenomena:

Witticisms unfold in the dimension of metaphor, that is, beyond signifiers, insofar as when you try to signify something with a signifier, you will always signify something else, whatever you do. It is a signifier that gives the appearance of stumbling that satisfies you, simply by virtue of the fact that, by this sign, the Other is acknowledging this dimension of the beyond where what is at issue has to be signified and which you cannot signify as such. This is the dimension that witticisms reveal to us (*Seminar V* 135).

One can see that the function of the Other concerning a metaphor consists in acknowledging and thus making it possible to maintain "the dimension of the beyond" of signifiers. A metaphor is a failure, a stumble which triggers an affect—pleasure in the case of a good joke and, let's add, a fine poetic metaphor; resentment in case of insult; amity/conformity in case of giving nicknames—which becomes a sign of recognition in the Other of the subject's existence and desire. Coming back to the *feeling offended* issue, we have to note that, paradoxically, it verges on a rejection of any desire-beyond-signifiers and tends to equate the words and acts to the desire; thereby an intolerance to metaphor is revealed. Metaphor is definitely an obstacle for what is being promoted as safe space.

The discussion of the social dimension of the metaphoric effects of insults and witticisms brings us once again to the importance of the paternal metaphor. As we have previously mentioned, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the paternal metaphor is a symbolic device which the individual must come up with to resolve the Oedipal conflict which, in one's biography, usually takes place at the age of five. Freud assumed that the child's future social competence is significantly affected by the Oedipal stage and by the experience of being the element of the mother-father-child triangle. It is the age when a child becomes responsive to parental interdictions, to the father's *no* (*le "non" du père*) homonymous, in French, to the element of the trinitarian formula *the Name of the father* (*le Nom du père*) which Lacan conceptualized as a term representing the symbolic law in the structure of the paternal metaphor. However, to fully describe the paternal metaphor as the metaphor in the sense we have been promoting up to this moment, we need to shift from these psychoanalytic topoi and consider the process through the lens of the diversity of media—in the most inclusive sense—available to a child in the first years of its life.

Children's drawings give unique access to the process of mastering the signifier in its topological properties. In his book *Topology*, M. Manetti notes:

According to some psychologists, before the age of two-and-a-half children simply scribble. Between two-and-a-half and four they develop an understanding of sorts for topology, because they draw different pictures for open and closed figures. From four years on they can replicate all topological notions: a point inside a figure, outside it or on the border. Only between four and seven they start distinguishing simple figures (like squares, triangles) based on their size or angles (Manetti 39).

The studies by Joseph H. Di Leo, especially *Young Children and their Drawings*, offer rich illustrative material confirming this summary. Arguably nothing more than traces and elementary marks, scribbling is also characteristic of the preverbal stage when a

child is only learning to distinguish between vocalization and speech. A two-year-old child is normally capable of producing more sophisticated graphical proto-signifiers tending to an elliptic closed contour (di Leo 28-33), articulating the difference between *inside* and *outside* and serving as the elementary signifier of consistence. Remarkably, at this age, children are already able to give names to their drawings, that is, to coordinate verbal articulation with graphemes. Finally, by the age of introduction of the paternal metaphor, children are described as being able to recognize or identify basic geometric shapes and also attempt first portraits of their parents. The graphical signifier begins functioning as a unary trait (German: *einzigster Zug*), an elementary basis for identification: the caricaturesque quality of the portraits created by a child is a real success of metaphorization, since a signifier of one prominent feature—glasses or mustaches—authorizes the picture as a representation. In this sense, children’s drawings have a fundamental affinity with nicknames and insults, which are normally also based on overemphasizing singular traits. Topologically speaking, the *unary trait* refers to a property preserved through a series of deformations which, as a result, are defined as continuous. Therefore, it is possible to assert that children’s caricatures represent encounters with the topological criterion of continuity.

In the realm of verbal communication, the function of the unary trait is repeated by the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father. To understand its function, one does not have to delve deep into the analysis of someone’s familial encounters. The most important information is already encoded in the term: the name of someone’s father is a special name and signifier to that someone, whereas, to everyone else, it is an ordinary name. In Christianity, *Father* functions as the proper name of God the Father, so *the Name of the Father* in the expression “in the Name of the Father” is an elementary irreducible signifier with an enigmatic signification; and this explains why Lacan could decide to convert it into a quasi-algebraic psychoanalytic constant. In the seminar *R. S. I.* (29 January 1975), Lacan suggests that the authority of the

father's discourse, the power of a word pronounced in the father's name, is based on the simultaneously exceptional and banal, or—in Vappereau's spelling—*exceptionally banal* signifiers. The Name-of-the-Father is an exceptional and meaningful discursive element or feature within a family circle—a particular domestic custom or implicit convention, something seldom verbalized—which is banal and illegible for outsiders. Given that Lacan's concept also references ethnological studies of everyday practices by M. Mauss and the universal prohibition of incest by C. Levi-Strauss, it is also possible to use the term *Names-of-the-Father* (in the plural) to refer to social circles of various scopes: family, local community, nation. For instance, the mystery of the Trinity being one god makes sense only if one is a Christian, and mom's cooking is the way homemade food should taste, smell and look.

For a child, the introduction of the Name-of-the-Father begins with an acquired ability to recognize specific signifiers referring to the knowledge shared with parents and siblings. That is why it is important to highlight that such a highly elusive element is woven into and coordinated by a network of other unary traits shared by the members of the family: minor paralinguistic idiosyncrasies, habitual reactions, routines, smells, clothes, preferred colours, hygienic standards, etc. Through such a subtle and metastable articulation of the (proto-)signifier, a child's separation from the primordial object—the mother—takes place, which, once again, we must consider in terms of the signifier's topological aspect. Topologically, the signifier causes the temporalization and spatialization of communication and hence conditions the child's identity as a temporal and spatial being. This is the stage when the subject enters “the Saussurian dynamic of diachronic and synchronic tendencies” mentioned by Stiegler in the passage we cited at the beginning of this chapter. Due to the incommensurability between the tendencies, the dynamic in question inevitably engenders idiomatic and idiosyncratic inconsistencies which only metaphors can coordinate and preserve for discourse.

Lacan's precise definition for psychosis is *the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father*, which he explains as follows:

It is an accident in this register [in the signifying chain] and in what occurs in it—namely, the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father in the place of the Other—and the failure of the paternal metaphor that I designate as the defect that gives psychosis its essential condition, along with the structure that separates it from neurosis (Lacan, *Écrits* 479).

Let us note that the accident in question is thinkable as breaking the coordination between the unary traits. An important aspect of the Other becomes unknown to the subject, and, facing an inconsistency requiring delicate metaphoric coordination, but having no appropriate knowledge, the subject is doomed to fail:

For psychosis to be triggered, the Name-of-the-Father—*verworfen*, foreclosed, that is, never having come to the place of the Other—must be summoned to that place in symbolic opposition to the subject.

It is the lack of the Name-of-the-Father in that place which, by the hole that it opens up in the signified, sets off a cascade of reworkings of the signifier from which the growing disaster of the imaginary proceeds, until the level is reached at which signifier and signified stabilize in a delusional metaphor (481).

What Stiegler terms *disruption* refers to a global and monumental extirpation of the Names-of-the-Father. Surprisingly, of the three negations constitutive of psychoanalytic symptoms, Stiegler does not mention foreclosure (*Verwerfung*), instead organizing his analysis of *digital madness* only around denial (*Verneinung*) and disavowal (*Verleugnung*). He asserts that the main tendency in the political discourse of computational capitalism is the denial of regression (the tendency to hide asocial motives), which is symptomatic of neurosis. The moral discreditation and cynicism

of power is echoed by the rise of future-nihilistic youth and people's general disbelief in collective values and goals. Based on the enormous growth of the media-sphere, the economy intensifies exploitation of the unconscious drives, but the culture fails to provide mechanisms for their sublimation. As a result, the circuits of the intergenerational and intragenerational transmission of knowledge and values disintegrate. As for disavowal (of castration), symptomatic of perversion, Stiegler explains its relevance to the technological condition as follows: "the organism is constituted organologically, but . . . it does not see this exosomatic condition that conditions both its soma and its psyche" (Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption* 274). In psychoanalysis *the phallus* symbolizes the principle of the symbolic or, in Stiegler's terms, *the organological integrity of the body*, and is usually considered the organ par excellence. Symptomatic disavowal of castration is an attempt to resist the external symbolic determination of the subject's relationship with the proper body. Stiegler argues that disavowal is fully applicable to the inherent ignorance characteristic of capitalism to the consequences of its technological determination. Yet is there a place or necessity for analyzing foreclosure in similar terms?

As we could see from Lacan's definition above, the success of the paternal metaphor is a necessary condition for being a non-psychotic yet not immediately "trouble-free" subject.¹³ There can be neither disavowal nor admission of castration without the prior formation of the paternal metaphor because "the signification of the phallus . . . must be evoked in the subject's imaginary by the paternal metaphor" (Lacan, *Ecrits* 464). The primordial metaphoric structure is pivotal for the development of the subject as a collective being. The terms *the phallus* and *castration* are correlative of the above-mentioned—highly topologically connoted—*exosomatic conditioning of the body and the soul*, which concerns the subject as technics—according to Stiegler's definition: "Man is technics" (Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption* 251). As our explanation above implies, with the Name-of-the-Father we encounter the elementary domestic meaning

of technics/techniques of life and self that involves the care of one's proper body and self-expression. In turn, Stiegler continues the analysis of these techniques on the level of such higher-level and complex systems as national polities and the global civilization.

Drawing on Lacan's suggestions concerning the paternal metaphor and Stiegler's interpretation of digital madness, this chapter's concluding thesis is this: the digital disruption is an institutionalized and technologically realized foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father. If we agree with Stiegler's categorization, we have to accept that, due to the digitalization of media, the conditions of possibility of the Lacanian metaphor are at risk. In subsection 132. "Psychotic capitalism of The Age of Disruption," Stiegler describes computational capitalism in terms almost identical to Lacan's description of paranoid delirium: "Having de-realized the real, capitalism itself becomes psychotic" (297). In Lacan's analysis, such de-realization of the real results exactly from the foreclosure due to which one's psychic reality never acquires effective and independent symbolic and imaginary coordinates.

When it comes to the critique of the permanent "creative destruction" of social structures and the self-revolutionizing relations of capitalism, the idea of foreclosure is usually enlisted by the sweeping declaration—which has become commonplace for Lacanians—of the end of the symbolic order and/or the paternal law. However, one should understand where such generalizations may lead us astray concerning the problem of the Names-of-the-Father. Before the digital, analog media such as radio and television conditioned the massification and standardization of people's experiences, tastes, goals, values and knowledge. Thus, the difference between the mass-cultural Name-of-the-Father and the familial ones has become barely legible. *Jeans, burger, pop, baseball, Hollywood, tooth whitening, popcorn, school prom, etc.*, have become the consumerist Names-of-the-Father referring to exceptionally banal experiences and memories shared nationwide. In episode 13/5 of the TV series *The*

Mandalorian, in a fictional faraway galaxy, a human-looking caregiver plays a game with his alien-race fosterling all-too-resembling a father-son backyard baseball catch game. The scene is doubtlessly aimed at triggering the viewer's immediate recognition and identification with the characters.

However, the overlap is not yet the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father. The foreclosure takes place for a subject in so far as it is articulated by and to the network. Our relation to the digital is psychotic because we are lacking a dimension in which the otherness of the ubiquitous computation medium could be articulated. Kittler predicts that "a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium" (Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* 2). In Stiegler's terms, this would mean something other than the disavowal of exosomatic conditioning, because an erasure of the concept of medium affects the possibility of organo-logy as such. Thus, the universal digital medium, the medium of all media, instantiates the foreclosure. By taking on the task of "media-linking," it eliminates the extrinsic diversity of media and thereby cancels the metaphoric coordination of the inconsistent. As one can see, our initial analysis of the relationships between user and computer in terms of the ego-ideal in the place of the Other leads directly to this point where computers are granted the task of coordinating formerly heterogeneous media. Linking what previously had been analog media now entails unifying the analog by a series of electromagnetic signals, which replace the extrinsic diversity of media with zero-dimensional digits. As Kittler writes, "computers represent the successful reduction of all dimensions to zero" (*Optical Media* 227). In Lacanian terms, the universal medium replaces the Other.

Logical inconsistency and extrinsic media diversity become the main conditions making the Lacanian metaphor incompatible with priorities implemented in digital technologies. The analysis of the conditions of the paternal metaphor explains the occurrence of a link *madness-digitalization* problematized by many prominent cultural

theorists and by Stiegler most recently and insistently. We could see that the elementary coordination provided by the paternal metaphor in one's early years thereafter mediates interindividual relations in the dimension of the Other. The latter preserves a possibility of inconsistency and incompleteness as well as mediates and moderates the subject's encounters with it. In its broadest sense, metaphor is a symbolic device linking the signifiers regardless of the cognitive or any other gaps between them, in a manner that makes appellation to the Other inevitable; this is the Lacanian feature of a poetic and rhetoric metaphor. In opposite, the mediation provided by digital technologies eliminates the gaps—the inconsistency and incompleteness necessary for the existence of the Other. A metaphor-coordinated relationship with the digital becomes unrealizable.

Chapter 3

The Agency of the Medium in the Incorporation of the Trauma as the Primordial Event

In media studies, infrastructuralism promotes a distinctively ontological vision of media and best exemplifies the idea of "media as the first philosophy" (Galloway, Thacker, and Wark). According to John Durham Peters, "Media are our infrastructures of being, the habitats and materials through which we act and are" (Peters 15). However, the attempts to think media as an ultimate ontological foundation can be contested by an alternative assumption that an absence of mediation, a rupture in the infrastructure can have a positive ontological value. One can find an argument like this in Badiou's theory of event which in turn owes a lot to Lacan's theory of a primordial split in the subject. In contrast to media as the first philosophy, both Lacan and Badiou suggest that our being as subjects has foundations radically other than media. In this chapter, we break down the psychoanalytical aspect of this argument and, consequently, work with a non-totalized ontological concept of mediation.

As we show below, in Lacan, a rupture that divides the subject and the Other

is a pivotal moment for what psychoanalysis considers as embodiment or incorporation. The incorporation of the original rupture gives life to the drives that become an autonomous and constant power beyond the reach of consciousness. Psychoanalysis preeminently relates the question and the ultimate meaning of mediation to the existence of these unconscious drives which thereby must be considered as logically prior to the means of their representation. In a sense, the drives can be even considered in terms of resistance to mediation, i.e., as this tendency as such. They go against any biological and rationalizable reason, cannot be intellectualized or cancelled and only follow their own course of the restless repetition. On the basis of the presumption of the drives, we find it possible to suspend the belief in media as an ultimate infrastructure. Precisely, we will demonstrate that the being that such an infrastructure, especially when it becomes more integrated and intellectual, implies does not exhaust all possibilities and even precludes certain possibilities of being.

Rupture

What is Naive Body?

Lacan's theory of incorporation in a nutshell concerns the individual's assimilation to the symbolic identities provided by language and culture. It is figuratively described as an entering of *the symbolic body* into *the naive body*, because, as one may suppose, the naturally given body is to be subjected and mapped according to cultural codes. However, there are good reasons to suspend such a linear and naturalistic interpretation. One reason is explicitly given in the word *naive*, which, clearly, signifies *being unsophisticated, unaffected by knowledge*. In the context, a naive body can be the one that is ignorant concerning (something about) itself. Doubtlessly, this can describe the newborn's biological prematurity and the respective absence of an inborn integral neural body image. Lacan gears his famous theory of the mirror stage to this fact.

Also, there is no adequate means of articulation and memorization of what the bodily experience could be, at the earliest period. What it could have been can be implied and conceived of only retrospectively after its subjectification and cultural coding; yet its image will always be anachronistic. Meanwhile, Lacan considered the biological organism neither as a function of the ultimate reality nor as the reference point prior to socialization.

Moreover, it turns out that an opposite interpretation of the naive body is logically possible. While discussing the theory of body and embodiment in Lacan, Alain Badiou made a statement that appeared strikingly inconsistent regarding the concept of the primary body as natural or biological. Namely, he claims that this body is the Other (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 477-482). According to the conventional reception of Lacan's terminology, however, the Other is a symbolic instance, and it would be pertinent to assert that it is the Other that is entering the body and is to be assimilated with. It seems counterintuitive, especially for the writer working on ontology, that the signifier is the body's original identity. With the understanding that all elements of the argument will become clear as the discussion advances, it is possible to confirm right now that, unlike the popular interpretations, Badiou's thesis is exactly accurate and consistent with Lacan's concept of the symbolic and embodiment. Badiou perfectly understands the fact that embodiment presupposes the emergence of the body's symbolic relationship with itself as the Other. We must see the reasons for this dialectical opposition inside the symbolic in the course of specifying what today may be considered the naive body and the symbolic Other.

In contrast to the idyllic bourgeois images of family as a natural cell of socialization, the symbolic realm, as the agent of the symbolic body's incorporation, cannot be reduced only to a few significant others that channel culture to the individual. The symbolic is represented by all available information sources and communication channels that function as both imaginary and symbolic identification props. Furthermore,

some recent developments in the technical infrastructure imply that the naive body cannot be unconditionally identified as just an individual organism. Such technologies as face, voice and gait recognition, movement, air pressure alteration and infrared (heat) radiation detectors, complemented by passive and active tracking devices installed into our payment cards, IDs and mobile devices, presume that the physical presence of an individual body can, in different situations, expand indefinitely farther than the place a biological body could occupy in a unit of time. It is difficult to decide whether such body parameters as emitted heat, sound, visage, opacity, weight and volume are body parts, since thereby the body produces real effects in other (technological) bodies; or rather these are some mediating instances and substances, as they can be accessed, transmitted or measured only provided there is a physical medium, such as air or an electromagnetic field. Numerous sensors, detectors and tracking technologies are developed to interact with mobile bodies,¹⁴ unlike the prior—pre-digital, pre-modern—means by which the reality and presence of the body has been socially recognized and signified, such as the mirror, the garment, the room, the grave etc. As Mél Hogan notes, “[T]he body itself has become a great source for data generation: from facial recognition, ear scanning, heartbeat monitoring, fingerprinting, iris scanning, vein mapping, gait analysis, typing patterns, and voice recognition to DNA identification” (Hogan). Consequently, wishing to conceive of the actual structure of embodiment, one cannot content oneself with the popular image of the mirror stage and the family circle socialization.

Rupture

Let us shift the spotlight from the confusing interplay of the naive and the symbolic or the body and the Other, in the previous representation, and consider the logically primary embodied element. According to Lacan’s suggestions, the intersection of the symbolic and the body leaves a trace which psychoanalysts call *primordial trauma*.

Trauma had become the major topic of the last class of Lacan's ultimate seminar *Dissolution* (1980). In French, its text was published under the title "Malentendu" (*misunderstanding, misconception*).¹⁵

Let us briefly look into the theoretical background.

As Freud has once suggested, the unconscious originates in a primary repression being the repression of some primordial trauma. In this sense, *the trauma* refers to a virtual frontier in one's psychic structure beyond which a deeper analysis is not possible and does not make any sense. Although no consensus had been achieved whether it refers to a real traumatic event or a structural effect, many orthodox psychoanalysts relied on Freud in assuming that the parental coitus accidentally witnessed by the child could be the primary scene, the memory of which is being most intensively concealed and transfigured in one's psychic 'archive,' whence emerge neuroses.

A heterodox opinion was suggested, at the time, precisely in a book *Das Trauma der Geburt* (*The Trauma of Birth*) published in 1924, by Otto Rank, who insisted that the primordial trauma is the trauma of birth—the primary psychic experience of separation from maternal proto-substance and the first existential crisis. Rank's version had an incontestable advantage over Freud's. Instead of a contingent encounter, e.g., either with witnessing of the parental intercourse or some other event overinvested with affect, i.e., an encounter that some subjects never experience, Rank chooses birth, a universal-type event, as an explanation for the factual domination of a neurotic (post-oedipal) predisposition in people. Nevertheless, the obvious weakness of this hypothesis was that it explained neurosis, i.e., a properly human, culturally, and socially recognized issue, by the biological event common to all animals; and that implied a legitimate question: what makes the human neurosis what it is.

A popular alternative to it has been the idea that weaning is the traumatizing event. It both accounted for the biological necessity, this time represented by breastfeeding, and stressed that it is a cultural intervention that intersects the natural

biological bond between the mother and her child.

In turn, Lacan attempted to avoid the Scylla and the Charybdis, accordingly, of the particularism, of either the empiricist or personalist type, to which Freud's suggestions opened the way, on the one hand, and the overgeneralization, of either the vitalist or existentialist type on the other. Therefore, he associated the trauma with a no less universal encounter, which he abbreviated as follows: we all are born of misconception. The French *malentendu* literally says that one makes some mistake while hearing (*entendre*), i.e., mis-hears or hears badly (*mal*) the speech of others. The traumatizing misunderstanding is the one that the child once discovers in the Other.

If we read "Malentendu" in parallel with *Seminar VI* (1958-59) and "The Subversion of the Subject" (1960), we find that Lacan has already discussed the significance of this discovery. There, he points out that the child first perceives the Other, represented by parents and other significant adults as the bearers of language and the treasure troves of signifiers, as aware of the child's every thought and want. Until something suddenly proves the opposite, children behave as if their speech and language belonged to the Other. They are unable to hide what they have in mind from others and keep their mouth shut when asked about that. What the child is initially unable to maintain is a distance between the production of a statement and its utterance, or, putting it in other terms, to censor the translation of thoughts into words.

As our previous observation suggests, the Other, represented not only by family members but also by all information sources available to the individual, perfectly instantiates itself as the Other inherently divided and ignorant about itself and mostly unresponsive to the subject's appeals. We are no less traumatized through our interaction with the Other of Information and Knowledge than is a child by mishearing of its parents. This prefigures our further speculations about the real of mediation, to

which we will proceed after a closer look at the meaning of the concept of trauma in application to the mobile body, the correlate of mobile technologies, as *the naïve body* of Lacan's note on embodiment.

Let us identify the first component of mobile body's embodiment. Speculatively, it can be defined as disappearance of the transparency in the interaction between the body and a piece of technology. We suggest that we consider it in three aspects. First, it can happen due to some malfunction. Second, more interestingly, the piece of technology may function exactly as it should, and this brings about confusion, nevertheless. Third, a non-transparency can result from an immanent rupture in the infrastructure.

Examples of the first type are quite easy to name. Consider a situation when an automatic door 'forgets' to open before somebody goes into it, or a public washroom's tap or hand dryer sensor refuses to 'see' somebody's hand and to give off, respectively, water or hot air. These events introduce some deviation into the technological infrastructure's monotonous functioning. In terms of semiotics, it is a deviation from the code of interaction, a message that challenges the code, a failed signifier (in the sense of the signifying system). In spite of being reduced to a simple optical signal, the body's presence in the scene turns out to be unrecognized by the technological Other, excluded from the automated signal processing, and is subjectivized thereby or on this basis. Obviously, it is only then and only in such situations that technology is raised to the level of the Other and the mobile body becomes a signifier split between the Other and the subject. Analogously, to employ an example related to more complex technologies, the occurrence of a loss of personal information due to some issue in a computer or the database can become a little revelation that the digital Other can be not seeing, hearing, and knowing something about the subject.

Technological malfunction is a sufficient but not necessary condition for the signifier's rupture. Consider an odd situation, when a traveller cannot use their payment

card in another city, because, as it turns out, the banking AI has classified the transaction, attempted from without a usual location, as a suspicious activity and blocked it. The security algorithms are meant to draw such conclusions, so there is nothing wrong with the equipment. At issue is the discrepancy between the client's vision of how it should work and the technologically rational solution; a structural discrepancy which, to reveal itself, nonetheless requires a real encounter. The reminder that the intellectual-technological infrastructure can be dumb, blind, and unintelligent can shake the illusion of information transparency, effortless mobility, and ubiquity.

Obviously, the actual milieu of the naive body is highly heterogeneous, since it includes, besides the digital, all sorts of other media and, besides the media, people. Interacting with it can provide a full experience of the inherently divided Other. Consider a child's early socialization in the family. To get a realistic idea of what the socializing instance, the little one's symbolic Other consists of, in addition to parents and siblings, one could think of all those talking heads randomly appearing on the TV that never shuts off, silly-sounding animated characters from the mobile video games, and invisible virtual assistants that are often reduced to a voice only. The child usually does not have to wait for a revelation from the parents' bedroom to discover that the Other is blocked out from itself, or that, paraphrasing Freud's famous observation, the Other literally does not hear itself shouting.¹⁶

Three Registers

Certainly, to a greater or lesser degree, the events described are a constant element of our everyday experience. Therefore, it is reasonable to distinguish between, on the one hand, the periods of stability when one can afford to be immersed into reality, the seamless functioning of which is maintained by all those services and devices, and, on the other, the ruptures in this semblance of natural functioning. Based on Lacan's theory, the latter trigger the subject's emergence, and the former describe its *fading*

(Lacan, *Ecrits* 708-709). We can distinguish between three psychic registers proposed by Lacan, i.e., imaginary, symbolic, and real, in this *primordial pulsation*, as Lacan qualifies it. We find this possibility crucial for a fuller understanding of what the first prerequisite of embodiment includes. Since the subject is intimately related to the reign of the signifier, hence the symbolic, its *fading* must correspond to its capture by the image and the imaginary. While the real is, accordingly, the split that divides the signifier and thereby introduces it. All three are immediately present at the subject's inaugural event.

In our brief interpretation we have coupled the phases of that pulsation not only with registers but with two types of medium: symbols and images. Galloway (Galloway, Thacker, and Wark 25-76) has comprehensively explained the irreducible difference in the mediation associated with these two types.¹⁷ He suggests that the image has an immediate effect, in so far as it simply delivers the perceptual identity of the thing it is an image of. Although this point is not explicitly mentioned in his essay, we assume that the notion of image must include all perception channels, and one should be able to speak of an acoustic image as well as a visual one. This assumption enables a finer distinction between an acoustic entity in the function of signifier, i.e., symbolic, and in the function of an acoustic image, hence imaginary. For instance, the audio record can transmit the latter, the sound, but not the former, the signification. The image has power over the receiver's perception, and renders it passive to a high degree. That is why it is possible to talk about the subject's fading while interacting with the image (Lacan, *Ecrits* 116-117). For reasons that we will not discuss here, Galloway calls this type of mediation *iridescent*.

In turn, the symbolic mediation is such that the message always needs interpretation, the sign is opaque, since its relation to the meaning is arbitrary, and the receiver must know the code or be capable of hermeneutics. It is completely possible, though, for the same thing to become an iridescent or a hermetic¹⁸ medium, for example,

when a painting is either approached as a realistic representation of an object or read allegorically. Note that while Galloway discusses the typology of mediation, he does not touch upon the important question of transition between the modes. Meanwhile, Lacan's notion of primordial pulsation presumes not only a possibility of switching between the imaginary and the symbolic modes but also its regular occurrence.

At this moment of our discussion, we can only speculate about what the mediation in the register of the real could be. It seems plausible that for this, instead of Badiou's formula the body *is* the Other, we should consider the disposition where at issue is the body *of* the Other. This implies that the body now appears not as the signifier but as the signified, not even as a sender or receiver but as a target. It is a target for the rupture that affects it, in a very Spinozist sense of affect as a direct (physical) action having an effect in the body. To conceive of this, we need to imagine a situation in which the rupture, the division, the splitting etc. becomes the message or the goal. However, we assume that the real scope of the relevant phenomena can be very wide.

A violent act that leaves a trace or wound on the body is an intuitive example that immediately comes to mind. Warfare technologies, with their pursuit of the most efficient delivery of damage, destruction, and death, perfectly demonstrate that violence is a legitimate object of cultivation and mediatization. Obviously, today, not only hardware solutions, such as cruise missiles and distant-piloted drones, but also software can be considered as a priority medium of the violence sanctioned by the concern of State defence. The ongoing race for dominance in computing, and particularly quantum supremacy, proves that, especially in the framework of the preemption paradigm, digital technologies have this strategic value. They provide the one who controls them with access to the mobile bodies and communities via a vast variety of means from simple gadgets and consumer electronics to automated urban and industrial infrastructures. Even more than weapons as the medium of destruction, these technological means make bodies maximally exposed to potential action.

The list can be continued by pharmacology as well as the various medical measures presuming the intrusion of foreign micro- and macro-objects and substances into one's body. It can include injections, surgery, implants, tattooing, piercing, scarification, smoking, intoxication, narcosis etc. As is the case with the media of violence, these practices primarily concern the techniques and technologies of forcing a change via direct access to the body.

The third prominent example is sexual relations. The rupture that is mediated by sexual intercourse, as well as by love and, traditionally, the institution of marriage, is specific. It concerns sexual difference or simply sex, which is a mark that no body can escape. Psychoanalysis is fundamentally committed to articulating the real of sex, for which it employs the theory of libido and drives. Historically, this approach has tended to reduce all other, the aforementioned included, aspects of the real to the realm of drives. This implies in this view that every action directed towards the body must be considered as sexuating. Lacan's common term for the enjoyment, presumed in sexual and numerous other activities, on the one hand, and suffering, as concerned by violence, on the other, is *jouissance*. Defining it further as the core element of mediation in the register of the real should counterbalance the previously used and semantically negative *rupture*.

Galloway's typology of mediation accounts for one crucial fact concerning the conditions for *jouissance* in the late capitalist era, which we will discuss in detail in the next section. According to him, *systems* have become the dominant medium after WWII. Admittedly, the war accelerated in unprecedented fashion the development of the systems of both private and mass, secret and public telecommunication and broadcasting media. Yet, for Galloway, the ubiquitous word *system* includes everything from social institutions, communications and technological systems to ecosystems and nature as such. Thinking in terms of systems, complexities, nonlinearity, and information is the effect of networking people, machines, and things. Proba-

bly, the contemporary nexus *MIME*—Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment—is a prominent manifestation of this “truly secular, and hence nihilistic, mode of mediation” (Galloway, Thacker, and Wark 60). Rather than representation, the correlate of systems or the mode of their account is databases (61). Meanwhile, nothing regarding systems has to do with sex, which Galloway distinguishes as an independent type of mediation. In this, his typology inherits Freud’s surmise, which has been further developed by Lacan and Foucault and since then has become a common place in critical theory, that capitalism is sexless, that it is a system fundamentally lacking knowledge of sex.

We must dwell on this point of incommensurability between the media-technological complex and sexual *jouissance* a little longer.

The Other’s Object

In this section, we propose a revision of some basic and commonplace ideas concerning the role of digital technologies in our life. Rather than extending or criticizing the dominant representations, we aim to deepen the analysis. Generally, the following discussion is focused on three questions. The first question concerns the widely observed and commonly reported fact of people’s voluntary and involuntary dependence on digital media. We will employ psychoanalytic theory to find out what reasons or what unconscious mechanisms attach the contemporary subject to the digital medium. The second question reflects one of the most popular answers to the previous one. Precisely, it is common to claim that both our personal and collective investments in computers and intellectual technologies are motivated by a human drive to knowledge. Thus, we need to provide an independent answer to how our attachment to ICT can be explained in terms of motivation to knowledge. This brings us to the third and central question: What links the (point about) reliance on digital technos-

structure and knowledge as a motive to the (type of) mediation provided by digital media? In what follows, we will try to convey the idea that the key to our relationship with the digital lies in the analysis of the relationship between the maternal subject, the way it has been culturally preconfigured since Enlightenment, and her object.

Motive to Knowledge

Let us briefly outline the major speculative points that inform this hypothesis and also draw on one reference common for psychoanalysis, philosophy, and media theory.

To pinpoint the earliest theoretic reception of media in western civilization, numerous media theorists quote Socrates as the protagonist of Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* and a ruthless critic of the medium of writing. It is also quite common to discuss Socrates/Plato's animosity to the artificial props for memory and cognition as one-sided or self-contradictory since Plato himself not only never ceased to resort to writing and the use of graphical means but moreover was a prolific writer. In other words, the figure of Socrates represents a conflict of two attitudes, of which one is an insistent excitation of a desire to know in the other, via Socratic questioning, and another is the resistance to the artifices that make cognition easier and knowledge transmissible and accessible. Alternatively, we may speak of two conflicting perspectives on knowledge: the knowledge towards which Socrates pushed his audience by means of questioning is something fundamentally different from the knowledge one can be taught. Socrates was not an educator, he was a *corrupter of the youth*, according to the famous verdict.¹⁹

Based on his strategy regarding knowledge, Lacan identifies Socrates as a perfect hysteric, because, in Lacan's psychoanalysis, hysterics are defined exactly by their passion to induce the desire to know in the other.²⁰ It is crucial to understand what the knowledge towards which the hysteric pushes her/his partner consists of. It is the knowledge of what sex, sexual difference and sexual relations are; and, importantly, it

is the knowledge the hysteric does not find in her/himself. Wondering what it means to be a woman, or a man is common for the hysteric. Not having it, s/he needs the other in and by whom this knowledge can be grasped. However, something repels the desire of this hysteric from the knowledge achievable via indirect communication when the Other is either impersonal or distant in space or time. The question is whether this stance concerns the presence or absence of some medium. This is what we need to find out. In any case, a desire to know embodied in the various cognitive and educational media is most obviously inspired by a subject other than the hysteric. And we will argue that it is the maternal subject.

Our opposition between the Socratic and the educational incentive to knowledge is based on the conventional distinction between the knowledge embodied in the mind and the knowledge objectified in the medium.²¹ While the former we associate with the hysteric's desire, the latter reveals its connection with education, in the modern time, and, in support for our argument and further propositions, we refer the reader to Kittler's brilliant studies on the subject of *Bildungsliteratur* (educational literature) and the genealogy of the phenomenon of mothers reading to their children in the late XVIII—early XIX centuries, such as *Discourse Networks 1800-1900*. The post-Romantic history of education, pedagogy and educational politics has been paralleled by an unprecedented multivector and multilevel attention to the institution of motherhood, which probably has been created anew along with the nascent universal schooling. Education had to begin with educating mothers; that is, a desire to educate the mother's desire has been present at the outset. Let us specify our angle with the following two points further to connect: first, the use of any communication medium is always accompanied by an impetus to literacy and the imposition of education (*grammatization* in Stiegler), and second, beginning from the mother's reading to and together with children, education endeavours to tame and codify the generally unruly cycles of excitation and inhibition in individuals.

As we have pointed out, the attitude towards knowledge of sexuality delimits the hysteric's and the mother's desire. Now we shall see a split that mediatization brings about to this knowledge.

Admittedly, at the intersection of capitalism, science and technology, sex and sexuality acquires a highly controversial status. On the one hand, as Colette Soler argues, prioritizing or maintaining the existence of a fundamental sexual difference appears incompatible with the dominant social system. Not only do the implied rigid identities clash with liberal values, but their existence counters the interests of the capitalist economy. Ideally, everyone must contribute to the creation of profit; and the imperatives of production and consumption fashion all individuals according to the universal categories: *worker, consumer, client, taxpayer*, etc. Scientific subjectivity also upholds and, according to some researchers, fundamentally informs the view of the non-essentiality of sex, since the scientific method presumes that its implementation will give anyone identical results. The subject of science is universal and genderless. Based on the universalist ambitions shared by capitalism and science, which they often call *the science of capital*, Lacanians infer that this system is inherently ignorant about sex and repressive concerning the knowledge of it. They maintain that modern hysterics are hystericized exactly by this systemic failure to provide subjects with sufficient coordinates concerning gender roles and identities (Soler, "Hysteria in Scientific Discourse" 48-55).

On the other hand, there is hardly a shortage in information or products related to sex on the market. Sex education is in school programs, and along with the ceaseless flow of academic publications on and media coverage of the topics of sexuality and gender, the fact implies that the general awareness about this subject prospers. Sex-related employment, production, and media, including social media, video games, software, videos, photos, and graphic art, exist in a greater variety than ever. According to a vulgar joke, alluding on the subject of the accessibility of internet porn, an

average modern teenager has seen more naked people than any of her/his ancestors had in the past. In other words, the situation is rather opposite to what the logic of asexual universality predicts. Therefore, if there is no shortfall in content, then we must look for an explanation in the function of the means of its delivery.

Our hypothesis is that, although the desire to know is inspired by the hysteric subject, the (desire for the) provision of means is inspired by the maternal subject. The technostructures exploit not only the symbolic resources of motherhood, such as the rhetoric of provision, help, support, procuring etc., but unintentionally employ and enact all resources of the underlying unconscious structure. The collective imagination draws on the maternal subject in a double fashion, such as by the enactment of its metaphoric potencies and by an inclusion of the institution of motherhood in a global system of symbolic and material exchanges and supply chains. There are several formal similarities between what we previously portrayed as a technological Other and the maternal figure as it appears in psychoanalysis, which we will be taking into account. We perceive and interact with the technological environment as an impersonal instance. At the initial period of its life, before the child masters and introjects the structures of interpersonal communication, the mother exists as such an instance for her child too. At that period, the mother's presence is as ubiquitous and substantial as the technological infrastructure that maintains our existence. Even if it is not completely one-directional, the exchange between the mother and the child as well as between the individual and the medium is highly uneven. These facts are very trivial and intuitive. Innumerable science fiction plots exploit this analogy between a maternal figure and an artificial techno-environment, for instance: the robotized enormous uterus that hosts billions of human bodies in *Matrix*, the AI VIKI that imposes its own concept of guardianship on people in *I, Robot*, the maniacal robot Mother in *I am Mother*, and, finally, the AI mainframe MOTHER that controlled all systems in a spaceship in *Alien*. Yet, risking falling into indelicacy,

we must add one even shallower analogy: both instances—the mother and the child—are excluded from sexual relations with their designated counterpart. Obviously, at this moment, this formula simply generalizes two unrelated aspects: the prohibition of incest and the irrelevance of sexual relations vocabulary to the human-to-technology relationship. Nonetheless, we will argue that this is the most significant point at which the unconscious identification with maternal desire predetermines one's position in relation to technological devices.

Maternal Care

A point where the figure of motherhood and the discourse of technological infrastructure intersect concerns the concepts of care and needs satisfaction. Many critics described the post-industrial civilization in similar terms as prolonging and cultivating immaturity in individuals. This trend is believed to be manifested 1) in the course taken by social states towards everyone's wellbeing, 2) in industry's orientation towards satisfying every need that arises, and 3) in the ideology encouraging individuals to invest in what pleases them.

On the topic of the service of these necessities, digital media are often described as tending to become ubiquitous. For many critics this ubiquity signals that the techniques and means of surveillance and control over individuals proliferate and interfere with our lives at more and more levels, leaving no place for privacy. Meanwhile, many agree that the technologies are an important instrument of biopolitics aimed at a rational administration of populations and people's lives. As the instruments of biopower, surveillance and control combine techniques of oppression and care. The means of such power simultaneously develop towards maximal submission and inclusive guardianship. The studies initiated by Foucault and continued by many talented followers have established that the attention biopolitics and biopower direct towards the intimate life of individuals must not be ascribed to state apparatus, public insti-

tutions and other third parties alone but can be traced back to families as the micro cells of power relations. This note brings us to the specific role played by maternal care in the genealogy of the ubiquitous guardianship attributed to the social state.

We assume that the intuitive concept of care stems from an idealized model of the mother's love, which itself is one of the rigid and persisting fantasmatic formations resisting analysis and critique. Psychoanalysis narrows its understanding of fantasy down to an element of an inert and immutable image persisting in every personal fantasy in its common broader sense. It is a rigid fantasmatic layer of personal identity providing the individual with a basic coordinate system. It is formed unconsciously, and its function is to prevent the repressed traumatic core of the subject from irrupting into the consciousness. In this sense, the fantasy of maternal love secures, immobilizes and fictionalizes both the imaginary figure of the mother and her unconditional commitment to a child. Uncovering the actual unconscious mechanisms that make a mother of a woman and tie the mother to the child requires something more than suspending the moral censorship and tactfulness. As our further analysis will imply, the opportunity to lift the ban from the sanctified figure is mostly granted by the very power this figure holds.

Indeed, in the intuitive sense, the maternal figure is associated with the most intimate corporeal relationship with the child, until a certain age. Although, commonly, a mother's attitude towards her child is not identified as repressive, oppressive, or suppressive, its realization is inevitably such. Maternal care is insistent and overwhelming. Since we assume that, as a regulative idea both in biopolitics and its criticism, *care* unconsciously reproduces the ideal of maternal care, we must know what, in turn, pulls the strings of the mother's desire and makes her care appear as it does.

Foreclosure of Genitality

Let us first consider the general relevance of the question of the mother as a sexed subject. Precisely, it is necessary to explain, first, how the mother's status as a sexed subject is presented through her communication with the child, and second, how this enables us to identify the maternal structure as dominant for digital mediatization.

To begin, we have to reemploy the naturalistic vocabulary and introduce a distinction between *genital* and *non-genital sexuality*. In *Excommunication* (Galloway, Thacker, and Wark 64-68), Galloway conveniently gives precedence to distinguishing sex, as copulation, as a generic type of mediation. For our argument, we borrow the simplified idea of copulation as a communication mediated by genitalia. All other types of communication that may lead to sex or not and have it or something else as a subject are mediated by something else: words, signs, images. Moreover, a trivial yet crucial detail distinguishes direct communication, i.e., when the communicators are present at the same place and time and not separated by a physical barrier, from communication at a distance (either spatial or temporal or both). Distinct factors define the possibility or impossibility of switching from one type of communication—chatting, other types of the verbal and nonverbal information exchange—to sex. Necessitating special supplementary means and channels to reconnect the sender and receiver, the spatial or temporal distance becomes the major obstacle to such an intimate encounter. When both communicators are co-present and have a face-to-face conversation, however, the major barrier between their current interaction and intercourse is symbolic. The forms of the latter vary from legal and moral norms to personal taste and an intuition of what is pertinent to a situation. This symbolic regulative element, which enacts the suspension of sexual inclinations, Lacan designates as *paternal prohibition*, *paternal signifier*, and *the name of the father*.

We suggest that communication at a distance, e.g., the technically mediated one, telecommunication, etc., meets the conditions of maternal desire, while direct commu-

nication is regulated by what is known in psychoanalysis as paternal law. However, reworking the symbolic censoring into a real barrier is possible too. For instance, such means as the algorithmic filtering off and banning of obscene language and images are currently embedded in many search engines and social media. The services take away from the user their personal responsibility for censoring desire. Meanwhile, independently of the considerations of censorship, the foreclosure of genitality becomes absolute due to the interactions mediated by complex networks as an infrastructural factor that combines people, machines, information, energy, natural resources, transportation and so forth. We may read in this vein Galloway's note that the communication implemented in such systems "destroys the primacy of sender and receiver, reduplicating communicative agents into endless multiplicity" (30). The systems that connect flows and places globally render sexuality and genitality irrelevant. While paternal law or the signifier of the name of the father is a regulative instance that is a part of the subject's constitution, the foreclosure, in this case, is nested in the Other.

Let us see in more detail how the foreclosure is connected to the maternal subject. She becomes an agent of the foreclosure when and because her own subjective structure includes disavowal concerning her child's genitality. The mother is, doubtless, a genital subject, but her type of sexuation presumes that she does not perceive her child as marked by genital sexuation. Moreover, although she has physical contacts with them while washing, dressing and undressing the child, etc, she would not admit the erotic nature of her acts and intentions. As the primary medium, as Galloway defines them when he outlines sex as a type of mediation, genitals are excluded—or, as we have specified, foreclosed—from the mother-child communication. Nevertheless, *non-genital* does not mean *asexual*. For the mother is a sexed subject, the child, especially a son (Fink, *A Clinical Introduction* 172-174), is necessarily involved in her libidinal constitution, i.e., the structure of her fantasy and the symbolic economy connecting her with both her social and sexual Others. Precisely, the child is her object,

the object of the mother's desire. This object's being non-genital is a *sine qua non* condition of the mother's libidinal investments into it, realized in a form of insistent care. The profound motivation of such care is keeping genitality at a safe distance from the object.

The disavowal has two counterintuitive implications. One is that, in the mother's relationship with her Other, the child has a function of the phallic mediator: it is the mother's pride, her compensation for the symbolic castration and her answer to the Other's demand. We will see in a moment a difference between the phallic and the genital medium. Another implication is that the incestuous encounters that nonetheless happen to certain individuals do not completely break the logic of an exclusion based on disavowal. Maternal *jouissance* ultimately implies an incestuous union with her object. Commonly, the imaginary bonds between the mother and the child are articulated in terms of *immediacy* and *continuity*. These two powerful predicates render the (principle of) genital mediation inapplicable to the maternal subject and her object of desire. Provided that the principle is not confused with its implementation, the unity of the two elements—the exclusion of genital mediation and an incestuous conjugation with the object of care—can be conceived of dialectically, i.e., allowing for a conflict within the subject.

We must further distinguish between foreclosed and forbidden genitality. The former preserves the child's status as the mother's object, while the latter corresponds to the state of the subject's separation from the maternal Other. In this sense, for a would-be-genital subject, which emerges from the separation, the ban on incestuous impulses will metaphorize what appears to the child as the mother's puzzling attitude towards it. This is an elementary feature of what Lacan calls *the paternal metaphor*, which generally functions as the unconscious normalizing principle for sexual communication. Meanwhile, despite the metaphoric rearticulation, the dissimilarity between foreclosure and normalization not only can be experienced from, but is maintained by,

the established means of remote communication. This is because such communication significantly shifts the coordinates once found of genital sexuation and repeatedly returns the subject to the position of the pre-genital object. Our further analysis explains this point in more detail.

On the basis of Lacan's propositions made in "The Seminar on the Purloined Letter" and *Seminar XVIII*, one can infer that communication at distance generally has a feminizing effect (Lacan, *Écrits* 22, *Autres écrits* 12) regardless to the sender and receiver's actual sex. For instance, Lacan's object in that analysis, the letter, functions as the signifier of an impossible, either at the time or at all, genital mediation of the relationship between the communicators. The letter is an object-message, which the one who has had it—this is the masculine subject identification—sends and becomes without it thereby. In turn, the one who has not had it—the feminine subject identification—receives it, though, as the other's object. Briefly, in Lacan's argument, the addressee is always feminized due to structural reasons. To this we may add that, in the place of the sender, even the one who possesses a penis has to make the medium its substitute, thereby making his gender's distinctive feature detachable and transmissible (*Seminar VI* 120). Thus, provided a successful message exchange, both communicators occupy the position of the feminine subject. Whence Lacan's point that the letter as the medium functions as phallus, that is, the symbolic mediator between the sexes and the representative of sexual difference. Defined in this way, the phallic medium substitutes for the genital medium foreclosed by the very fact of correspondence.

All we need to do to see the agency of maternal instance in such communication is shift the focus from the communicators, with their exchange of the phallic signifiers, to the circuit that attaches each of them to the medium and specifically the channel on which they depend and rely. The more autonomous it becomes, like the postal service, the telegraph, and the telephony, and the more systemic the mediation it provides,

the more it acquires the structure of foreclosure. The same is trivially true for one-directional communication, such as between the author and the reader, the artist and the audience, the broadcaster and the receiver, the database provider and the end user. Whenever it is possible to identify a will to the establishment of a specialized system that monopolizes a certain medium, we come across an unconscious maternal desire. Taking hold of the medium, which we previously defined as phallic, turning a phallic signifier into a phallic sign,²² is exactly what happens to a woman when she identifies with the mother's desire and consequently becomes a mother. Partially, those whose employment presumes curating, custodianship, and other versions of caregiving—teachers, nurses, librarians, etc.—can identify with this desire and this image too. In other cases of this identification, especially in administering a communication sector, the background maternal model (of knowledge) can simply remain unrecognized or, in Stiegler's terms, *transindividualized*, because first, the place of a full or literal identification is too exclusive and generic, and second, it involves a *jouissance* which it is impossible to subjectivize and which resists identification, on which more below.

Identification with the Gaze

To prepare for our further point, let us for a moment narrow our analysis down to the element of identification with the maternal gaze. To do this, we will compare two mass-media representations of different feminine perspectives—the mother's and the lover's—on masculine masturbation. Rather than discussing the overall obvious reasons for the different represented reactions we are about to outline, we must focus only on the representation of the gazes, because all other considerations notwithstanding, it is in representation that an identification with the gaze becomes accessible.

The typical scene that has long ago become a comic cliché portrays a teenager startled by a mother who unexpectedly appears at the bedroom door²³ to accidentally (as we are meant to believe) catch her child masturbating. Sometimes the angle, from

which the scene is filmed or imagined, is such that the teenager is situated somewhere between the viewer and the door. The teenager, most often male, is either in front of a computer or a mobile phone. The door is initially closed, and the mother enters it very suddenly and energetically but then immediately and just as abruptly freezes at the doorway. She gets wide-eyed, gasps, and promptly retreats to leave her son, also paralyzed and thrilled, alone again.

Compare this to another scene represented from a British TV commercial aired during the World Cup of soccer. A hot playful blond girl wakes up her boyfriend with an obvious intention, but he looks uninterested and annoyed; so, he leaves the bed and leaves the bedroom. When she follows him and is about to go downstairs, she finds him sitting in the living room, his back to her, making suspicious movements. She gets wide-eyed, frowns and angrily hails him. The man perplexedly replies "What?!" and shortly returns to his business. The girl fleets back upstairs; while her boyfriend is finally shown from the front, pumping up the soccer ball with a ball pump. The slogan explains: "The game comes first."

Both the mother and son's petrified gaze from the first scene represent the scopic drive and jouissance. The jouissance grips their bodies, blocks their minds, and indefinitely prolongs its aftereffect. The mother's eye turns blind to the genital object. She turns her head away making her gaze deviate from it; the disavowal prevails. The second gaze, that of the soccer player's girl, attests to a different passion. She is not grasped by the scene and does not avoid the eye contact with her man. She is jealous and impassioned rather than arrested and overwhelmed by an affect. The dimension of shame, which is so obvious in the former situation, is absolutely absent or masterfully disguised in the latter. If the gaze organizes the first scene, the second one is structured by mere semblance. One is of a brutal intervention and a reflex thrill, while another is of a symbolic and imaginary interplay. Identifying with the lover's gaze involves the imaginary rivalry, the castration of the scopic jouissance, and

its becoming phallic thereby. Moreover, it requires a focus on a partial object, which (the focus), applied to women, Freud has notoriously christened *penis envy* (German *Penisneid*). However, identifying with the maternal gaze reduces the whole of the human being, who happened to become the object of care, to a pure scopic object.

Media and Educational Concern

Let us now see how the identification with the gaze is built into a complex identification with maternal desire as it is manifested in the educational concerns of media.

Educational function is inextricable from media. In the last three centuries this nexus has been fortified by an unprecedented institutionalization and advance of public education and pedagogy. Today, outside the educational institutions, we can recognize implicit pedagogic ambitions, for example, behind such expansive initiatives as content ratings, as well as the cinematic or video-game adaptations of literary or other artistic pieces for particular viewer/player categories. These measures extend and complete the classic censorship tools such as the deletion of the pieces of texts and films, image blurring and access restrictions. Though it is often manifestly repressive, censorship concern something more sophisticated. On the one hand, it promotes and imposes grammar on the use of media. On the other hand, it reinforces a belief that learning is the essence and ultimate reason for communication. Obviously, the will to censorship can be implied by the anxiety that minors can learn something inappropriate and from nefarious parties. However, the cognitive impact becomes the major or ultimate issue only if a communication medium separates the parties and prevents physical interactions. The manifested pursuit of the audience's good operates with a vague and contingent category. Instead of such good, the real efforts of censors and educators are always inevitably directed to the medium.

Meanwhile, the threat of a psychic trauma due to unsuitable media content is real, and censors do not always exaggerate it, although, from the psychoanalytical point

of view, they tend to misunderstand its mechanism. A mediatised learning situation will isolate particular psychic tendencies, which reinforces their affective impact on the individual and increases the subjective value of the fixation on affects. In this respect, it is appropriate to speak of *jouissance* as that which Lacan opposes to knowledge, meaning that where *jouissance* takes place no knowledge is possible and vice versa. Thus, contrary to the belief of cognitive and pedagogic psychology, the trauma as *jouissance* cannot be learned, and thereby undermines the totalitarian ambitions of education. To see this we need to move, in the structure of maternal desire, from the perspective of the desiring subject to the perspective of the object of desire.

We should begin our consideration with autoerotic tensions. These tensions prevail every time one is left alone with the medium. For instance, while reading a book, watching a video, or playing a single-player console game, an individual tends to immerse in fantasies and sensations either directly or indirectly triggered by the activities, which is an unconsciously pleasing and addictive experience. According to the principle of its use, the medium provokes excitation in certain parts of sensorimotor system and inhibition in others. In addition, it imposes certain prearranged modes of the distribution of attention. At the same time, common parasitic acts such as scratching the body, picking at orifices, yawning, or even accidentally falling asleep also fall under the definition of autoerotic satisfactions in this context. Although examples like these are less vulgar than the proverbial masturbation in front of a computer screen, together with the latter they establish a personal idiosyncratic circle of banal private pleasures. The following discussion will concern two elements of autoerotic arousal: first, its tendency to ramble and refocus from one particular corporal subsystem onto another and, second, its capacity to turn the entire individual into an organ's extension.

In the situation when the autoerotic fixation is the only option because the Other is rendered absent (or remote), the (unconscious) drives take odd yet familiar forms.

Let us recall that Lacan names the following four drives: oral, anal, scopic and aural. When these drives are bound by genital sexuality, they are channelled respectively to the o/Other's body as possessing a sexual object. Their only field in autoerotism, however, is the subject's own body. As a result, an individual that sits for hours in front of a computer or TV screen may be prone to uncontrollable eating, i.e., casually becomes a puppet of the oral drive, as well as of the anal drive, when they experience a defecation urge, or simply periodically suffer from this or that discomfort in the buttocks.²⁴ Note that in contrast to the oral and anal drives, the scopic and aural ones are directly related to the two major perceptual information channels. This means that their artificial isolation makes the subject least protected from affectation through the gaze or voice, or from *hypercommunication*, in Galloway's terms²⁵ (Galloway, Thacker, and Wark 30). The relevant perversion of the scopic drive, or scopophilia, includes not only watching online porn but also the interest in viewing representations of dead, mutilated, dissected bodies, violent acts, accidents, and catastrophes. As concerns the aural drive, its autoerotic aspect may be illustrated by hypersensitivity to noises, intolerance to silence, and audio system fetishism, manifested by endless investments into headphones, sound cards, speakers, amplifiers etc.

At the level of educational institutions, the agency of the latter two drives is represented by visual and auditory distraction issues, which developmental psychologists associate either with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or other permanent or temporal disabilities in students. Quite predictably, a physician of the Age of Enlightenment, Adam Wiekard, who first recognized and defined the condition in 1775, makes use of the example of an educational situation (Barkley and Peters 627). Education is both a catalyst for attention disorders and an experimental environment in which they can be detected and reproduced. Two instances of power-knowledge—education and medicine—join here in the production of a diagnostic category. Together with another widespread diagnosis, OCD (obsessive-compulsive

disorder), ADHD is the most commonly given diagnosis for all categories of students beginning with preschoolers.

In the medicalization of a learners' progress, we must recognize in the first place a semiotic strategy of converting a signifier (a symptom) into a sign (a disorder). The difference is crucial; and the reasons for imposing it on learners are highly arguable: while the signifier is an entirely relational entity, which acquires meaning only in interaction with other signifiers, the sign is a codified rigid bond between the signifier and the signified. The individuals diagnosed with ADHD, OCD and other disorders become the living exhibits of the medical taxonomy. The institutions often keep personal file records and prescriptions that provide clues to a student's behavior. Thus, when a body is modelled as a sign, i.e., as a bearer of a disorder or its expression, any ambiguity between the empirical element of a student's behavior and its meaning can be eliminated. On the one hand, the body turns to a sign, while on the other, the sign, e.g., a taxonomic category, is objectified. We should dig deeper into the meaning of this coincidence of the sign and the object.

The visual and aural nature of the dominant distraction factors reveals the main fixation that the interaction with an information medium provokes. The impossibility of taking control over your own attention perfectly describes the agency of drives: the eye or the ear literally becomes an independent organ driven by an unknown force and entirely subverting the agency of the person. Strikingly, the child diagnosed with ADHD, or more tactfully, its attention behaves as a sporadically erect(ed) member. In turn, the educational and therapeutic measures pursue making the student and the student's attention behave as a completely different object that could be activated and calmed down on demand.²⁶ We may observe this intention in such simple regulations as the requirement to raise a hand to be allowed to speak, which redirects the student's spontaneous impulse from the vocal apparatus to an upper limb. As a result, the student's hand becomes an autoerotically overinvested organ which pops

up in response to some stimulus and shakes in convulsion when the excitation is excessive. Sometimes, students are required to stand up to answer a teacher's question or to greet a senior. Old-school pedagogy has also paid great attention to student posture while sitting or standing.

The desire behind education, in its modern institutionalized and rationalized form, and especially in its profound connection with mediatization, is not to suppress the drives and their libidinal value but to make the corresponding affect manageable, or at least calculable. On the basis of the previous discussion, it seems plausible that, regardless of its content, every medium mostly functions as an inhibitor. For instance, such tasks as reading or writing presume an inhibition of most of motor activity. The same is obviously true for watching TV and working on a computer. At a different level, the difficulties which a reader/writer confronts, such as those related to spelling, grammar or words meaning, exemplify the inhibitions inherent in the tasks themselves. This point is represented in a joke popular among rock musicians: if you need your bass guitarist to play softer, put a sheet of music paper in front of them; and if you need them to play both softer and slower, then let there be something written on it.

Digital media can be reconsidered from this point of view as a means of the automation and computation of inhibitions. Integrating many other media, they also represent a systemic approach to the general economy of the medium. In the context of our discussion, this means that they accomplish the mission of making a tamed phallic object out of the individual, i.e., the user, the mobile body. Precisely, the body is an object attached to the medium that introduces it to a system; or, figuratively, to use the oedipal metaphor, it is the mother's object which she produces—in a sense of both procreation and presentation, the way one produces an ID—to the Other as a means of justifying her existence and completing her identity.

This object's being belongs to the sphere of jouissance which, accordingly, is a kind of being that avoids knowledge. The subjectification of this failed knowledge

in the form of a personal inquiry into sex is a step yet to be made. Or, from a slightly different, speculative perspective, finding out the mechanism of switching from mediatized to subjectivized knowledge, i.e., how the real individuals manage to cross the gap, is the matter of a special study. Open to the minutest nuances of insatiable autoerotic tensions and thereby foredoomed to exploring the infinite spectrum of attention deficit, anxieties and panic attacks, the individual is constantly missing an opportunity of separation from the ubiquitous body of the Other as it behaves at the pre-genital state. When one is equipped with all means that expand cognition and awareness, that monitor everything from events in the world to blood sugar, it is difficult to leave the domain of the knowledge articulated by signs, i.e., ready-made or assured meanings, for knowledge proposed by the signifier, i.e., questions rather than answers, neurotic doubt rather than psychotic certainty.²⁷

Clinical Psychoanalyst's Perspective on Scientization

By now, we have been leaving aside the proper therapeutic aspect of the formal replacement of *the symptom* with *the disorder*. However, it turns out that the semiotic operation appears questionable not only from the perspective of the learning process. For example, Andrew Skomra argues that medicalization, like the phenomenon we observed in the aforementioned cases, is a means of silencing the symptom:

As the subject outside of psychoanalysis is more and more mistaken for merely a biological entity, a rampant medicalization of the symptom has ensued. ...The symptom, in this epoch, is typically viewed as a hapless neurological accident whose effects must first be quantified and then silenced as efficiently as possible. ... [T]he silencing of such symptoms would be to irremediably sever the subject's relation to desire (Skomra 5).

Along the line of our argument, we suggest interpreting the metaphor *silencing* in terms of the aural drive rather than repressing or censoring. To be silenced, the

symptom must be taken purely as an aural object: the voice. In terms of Lacanian theory, severing "the subject's relation to desire" must mean a complete submission of the individual to the Other's demand, which is tantamount to resigning oneself to the control of the drives (Lacan, *Seminar VI* 119-120). To develop this point and also point to the persistence of the aural metaphor, let us provide a comment from another psychoanalyst, Bruce Fink, that explains the difference between working with symptoms and disorders in terms of therapy:

Many other things contribute to making the analyst constitutionally incapable of hearing a great deal of what the analysand says (for example, a high degree of obsessionality), not the least of which is our training itself. In many training programs, whether in social work, psychology, psychoanalysis, or psychiatry, students are encouraged to believe that there are such things as 'expert knowledge systems'—systems of 'knowledge' like that found in the DSM—and that it is our task as clinicians to simply apply them to the best of our ability as quickly as possible. I have heard individual teachers in all of the above fields tell students that they should dispense the expert knowledge they have acquired to their clients or patients, and if they do not do so they are deliberately flouting all of the (so-called) empirically validated treatment (EVT) protocols and evidence-based therapies (EBTs). Psychology and psychiatry have, after all, they argue, now been placed on a scientific footing, taking the guesswork out of clinical practice. Practitioners need but listen in a somewhat cursory manner to figure out where a particular patient figures in the diagnostic manuals that have received the seal of approval, so to speak, from the relevant APA, for those manuals (and their supplements) will tell them which techniques to employ. If we begin to listen only for the patterns or sets of patterns that we have been taught to identify and treat, we are

likely to turn a deaf ear to anything that does not appear on our DSM radar screen (Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique* 22).

Fink's message is noticeably clear and striking: the more intelligent and epistemologically justified the approach to diagnosing and treatment, the more the patient acquires the features of the object of the drive, the excessive object-a that is never in its place. Their speech, for example, is addressed to "a deaf ear," which means that it exists as an object of the aural drive rather than a signifier, as it should be. Far from simply maintaining that the solid diagnostic apparatus replaces listening to the patient, psychoanalysts implicitly localize the agency of the drive in the EBT instead. From the critique of silencing, Skomra goes on to discourage the excessive enthusiasm concerning the science-based therapeutic effect:

[T]he symptom begins ... where science fails... Psychoanalysis does accept that science, in the form of psychiatry and its discursive bedfellows, may produce knowledge, but asserts that none of it will properly correlate with the reality of these symptoms. ... [T]he standardization of care... is an epistemological failure. ... Science will not accept into the circuitry of its discourse the knowledge that something of the subject goes against life (Skomra 5-6).

The "something" that "goes against life" is *jouissance*; and we have already noted that it brings about a subversion of the cognitivist dogma. *Jouissance* is neither an unknown remainder nor a frontier of cognition. It is an elusive blind spot and the feature of the real which, recalling our short analysis of the maternal gaze can be expressed in La Fontaine's idiom (from "The Cat Changed into a Woman"): if the door of symbolic mediation by the paternal metaphor "has slammed in its face," then proto-psychotic affects that besiege the body will "come back o'er the window-sill."

From a slightly different perspective, one might see that the medicalization at issue may have broader implications that go far beyond the clinic and the classroom.

Faithful to her basic thesis on the link between capitalism and science, Soler proposes that the replacement of the symptom by the disorder has ideological and political meaning:

Now capitalist bio-power is allied with the ideology of science and with the performance values it supports, so basically, it no longer considers bio-symptoms as political dissidents, even if they have political consequences. Capitalist bio-power thinks of them as dysfunctions or as breakdowns of a human machine—neurological, hormonal, social, etc.—which goes haywire just as any machine could go haywire. This is a huge change that forecloses the value of the truth of the symptom that Freud revealed (Soler, *Lacan - The Unconscious Reinvented* 182).

Although Soler's portrayal of us as cyborgs may seem slightly old-fashioned, it perfectly accounts for two crucial and intertwined ideas we have discussed. First, both organic and mechanical representations of human bodies exploit a paradigm of communication as signal-response or stimulus-reaction cycles. Such bodies can both function as signs—signals that bear some positive information—and send signals to other bodies. It is the paradigm within which, as we have pointed out, the body of a learner is read as the signified of a disorder. Second, consequently for such bodies, the mediation by the signifier is replaced by the mediation by a material medium in the sense of another body-mediator which, be it a telephone wire or radio wave, materially connects the bodies, regardless of whether they are thinking, living or artificial ones. Obviously, when politicians think in such categories, they repress the very symbolic core of politics as thinking, i.e., the signifier in its power to authorize itself "on its own basis" through discourse (Lacan, *Écrits* 688).

To conclude this section, the psychoanalytic account of knowledge differs from cognitivism as embodied in contemporary intellectual technologies and knowledge economies. For psychoanalysis, knowledge always concerns sex, cannot be taught,

and can be acquired only in a roundabout way. From this angle, informatization and computerization continue the long history of the management of the techniques and artificial means of inhibition and fixation, for which they provide automated algorithmic solutions. The preclusion of genital communication is a necessary condition for the artificial induction of the inhibitions by means of which the individual enters the world of information and learning. To this type of knowledge, it is possible and necessary to oppose another one, which is based not on the foreclosure but on the prohibition of genital communication. In our interpretation, such intersecting trends as the collapse of the symbolic order in capitalism as diagnosed by European intellectuals beginning with Lévi-Strauss and on, the dissolution of the Oedipus, as promoted by Deleuzeans, the death of the Big Other and the impotence of the Name-of-the-Father, as maintained by left Lacanians, e.g., Žižek and others, all correlate with the systemic elimination of the symbolic regulation of communication and the imposition of technical mediation. The knowledge that happens to be foreclosed due to this cultural shift is exactly the knowledge one needs to separate oneself from the Other.

Alienation and Separation

Let us conclude this discussion of the relationship between media ontology and Lacan's concept of rupture by a brief outline of the theory of alienation and separation.

The primordial trauma is closely related to two processes: alienation and separation. Both concern an introduction of the difference between the subject and the object which, in turn, immediately involves the body. Whether the subject becomes the body's master, or alternatively whether the body persists as a tool or playground of subjectless impulses and automatism, is defined on this level.

Lacanians commonly understand alienation as a consequence of our conformity with language in order to communicate our needs and express ourselves. It corre-

sponds to some fundamental loss that can be established only retrospectively and fantasmatically as a lost innocence, immediacy or naivety because the means of its articulation are both posterior to it and belong to the instance that brings about alienation. The lost part of the speaking being²⁸ exists only negatively, like a hole or a void, as it corresponds to nothing that could be expressed in so far as it is opposite to anything that can be expressed. A simple example of alienation in action is when, by behaving strictly according to instructions or some institutional code of conduct, an employee expects to revoke personal responsibility for the decisions made in the occupied position and the consequences thereof. In other words, *alienation* corresponds to some virtual, pure functioning of a subject completely driven by a code; and this state could be described as “I am not thinking, therefore I am (in the Other).” Also, it imposes on the subject the infinite task of reuniting with the lost part, fixing the breach, which constitutes the register that Lacan calls *the imaginary*.

Separation is a consequent process that becomes possible when, this time, the constitutive defect in the Other—the Other’s castration, in Lacan’s terms—is revealed. For example, the Other turns out to be ignorant about the difference between inner and outer speech. The parents, who have taught their child how to use words, are unable to fully control their use. They also at times happen to be unaware that the other, the child, can hear them—back to Freud’s primary scene, they do not realize that they are heard while making noises in the bed. Thus, a part of the Other—a vocabulary, a secret, etc.—appears to be possible to privatize in the form of secret inner discourse. In contrast to alienation, the part separated from the Other is imaginable in positive terms, e.g., as an object, or better, as knowledge-as-an-object.

It is important to note that the theory of alienation and separation approaches the subject’s origin from the perspective of a dialectics of the Other and its object. Total alienation by the Other, which is only a convenient theoretical fiction, is a virtual stage on which one could consider the subject’s being the Other’s object.

However, the subject emerges as a result of separation from the Other, beginning to resist objectification, and thereby, on the structural level, separating from the Other's object, which does not cease to exist for the Other.

In terms of the early Lacan, the idea of the primordial rupture leads us to the realm of object relations, where we can approach something called *the transitional object*. The concept of the transitional object was introduced by psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott and discussed by Lacan in his seminar in the 1957-58 academic year. Winnicott notes that he has

introduced the terms 'transitional objects' and 'transitional phenomena' for designation of the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral erotism and the true object-relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected, between primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgement of indebtedness (Winnicott 2-3).

Developmental psychology quickly adopted this notion and defined this object as symbolic in nature, or as a symbol. As Jay Abram puts it,

The transitional object is a symbol, from the observer's point of view, of an aspect of the infant's experience of his environment. However, this does not mean that the infant using a transitional object has reached the capacity to use symbols; rather, he is on his way to using symbols. Thus the transitional object indicates a transitional stage of development, from object-relating to use of an object (Abram 343).

Our discussion of the rupture has already introduced this duality of the object that owes a lot to the dual perspective of an observer and a child, or the Other and the subject, in our terms. To explain it, Abram resorts to Winnicott's commentary:

When symbolism is employed the infant is already clearly distinguishing between fantasy and fact, between inner objects and external objects, between primary creativity and perception. But the term transitional object, according to our suggestion, gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and Similarity. We think there is use for a term for the root of symbolism in time, a term that describes the infant's journey from the purely subjective to objectivity; and it seems to us that the transitional object (piece of blanket, etc.) is what we see of this journey of progress towards experiencing (Winnicott 8).

As we pointed out in our introduction and Chapter I, Bernard Stiegler has demonstrated the importance of this notion for the philosophy of media and technology, in his study of the technical object as a transitional object (Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living*). He maintains that every piece of technology is ambivalent as a *pharmakon*, in the sense that Jacques Derrida, after Plato, has ascribed to the medium of writing. Namely, it is *medicine*, a means to improve something, and a *poison*, something that harms, at the same time. It is well known that technologies simultaneously bring progress in one aspect and degradation in another. When it comes to digital technologies, Stiegler warns us that overall the cultural and psychological effects, both direct and indirect, of their rapid proliferation have so far been noticeably negative. The generations that grew up and are growing up in the digital age face such challenges as general disorientation concerning life values and goals, nihilism, systemic crises of the capitalist economy, total absence of a confidence both in a personal future and in the future of the civilization, for example, due to the environmental crisis or global political issues, etc. From this, Stiegler concludes that modern technologies fail in the function of a transitional object that should mediate our personal and collective connection with reality and provide a link between prior, current, and future generations. Thus, in Stiegler, *the transitional object* designates an urgent problem

that concerns the existential implications of our relationship with technology.

In purely formal Lacanian terms, the crucial problem of this level of analysis can be formally defined as linking up the imaginary fill of the fundamental rupture/ breach, the incommensurability of the symbolic with itself and the rupture as the real. Let us now apply this formula to the definitions we elaborated in Chapter I. We propose defining the constitutive breach as a gap between constructible and non-constructible components of a situation and therefore between covers and works of truths. From the angle of Badiou's critique of constructibility, we may conclude that although Stiegler's diagnosis does not imply that the transitional object is not constructible in all possible senses, it is non-constructible at least in a sense of the formal concept of constructibility as algorithmic computability implemented in digital media. Also, from our discussion of this topic we may infer the following task of the subject in the age of social media and AI: 1) come up with a way to embrace the proliferation of opinions, identities and mass information without confusing it all with the truth, 2) embrace technologies without confusing their objectives with the essence of politics, science or art, 3) embrace digital disruption without confusing it with the event.

Chapter 4

Muse's "The Void:" Anxiety, Hope and Truth

Introduction

In 2018, the British rock band Muse released their eighth studio album titled *Simulation Theory*. The compositions on the LP generally address topics such as anxiety about advanced technologies and the search for a way to coexist with them, virtual experiences provoked by mainstream media or/and curated by social media, and the value of the human component of communication. In particular, "The Void," the closer track from the album that we are going to analyze in this chapter, objects to the dystopian and nihilistic vision of the meaning and destiny of human life and relationships. It also touches upon the possibility of our awakening from discouraging and depressing delusions to a better self-realization. In what follows, we discuss the narrative elements and other symbolic means by which these techno-pessimistic and techno-optimistic fantasies are made accessible to a general audience through articulation and adjustment to certain agendas and preexisting narratives. Of particular interest will be the way Muse's message on *anxiety, hope and truth in alliance with*

technology and the meta-messages that support it reflect the impact of digital media on the individual creative process as well as professional and personal attitudes. Our main purpose will be to identify the ideas and values for which “The Void” becomes a medium from a variety of perspectives. We will discuss the central topic of Muse’s album—anxiety about technology and the need to embrace it—in terms of the changes that concerned the band’s musical style, the visual aesthetics of their shows, their promotional strategies and their choice of the concept of simulation for the album’s title. Also, we will need to clarify Muse’s relation to the political and cultural trends that have been touched upon in the interviews and public talks of the album’s promotion period, such as popular protest and antiestablishment views, conspiracy theories, technophobia, new cosmological and sci-fi ideas, and eighties nostalgia.

Our reading of “The Void” will concern the way it reflects technology discourse, the affects it features and the concept of event it promotes. Muse’s musical concepts mainly feature the negative and dark aspects of contemporary technology discourse. The significant part of our case study will be dedicated to the shift of the Muse frontman’s interest to a more optimistic or inclusive perspective regarding technological development. Our study will show how this shift was informed by futuristic techno-utopian scenarios involving artificial superintelligence and the evolution of virtualization technologies. Bernard Stiegler’s concept of *neganthropy* introduced in his most recent writings and the critique of the promotion of *digital disruption* will help us to understand the nature of emerging techno-pessimistic and often apocalyptic sentiments in the context of the societal and ideological changes brought about by accelerating technological development of the last decades. In particular, we will look at the concept of “The Void” and *Simulation Theory* through the lens of Stiegler’s argument against the inherently nihilistic fantasies about a technological breakthrough.

Our further analysis of the affects expressed in “The Void” and other Muse songs will draw on Jacques Lacan’s concepts of anxiety, jouissance, fetishism and phobia.

We will discuss the idea of manipulation as the strongest source of affectation featured in the band’s music. The motif of manipulation will open the possibility to read the lyrics of “The Void” along the lines of Alain Badiou’s philosophy of the event and truth.

We preface this study with a brief explanation of the methodological basis of our approach (section I). The basic information about Muse, their album and the song “The Void” is provided in the second section. Then, in section III, we propose our integral reading of the piece and explain our vision of the meaning and function of its main structural components. Sections IV through VII discuss the intersections of pop-cultural, mainstream and oppositional or anti-mainstream trends where Muse’s concepts emerge. In these sections we provide our conceptual interpretations of their pieces. In our discussion, we will draw on the information available from magazines such as *New Musical Express* (NME), *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*, *The San-Diego Union-Tribune*; online media platforms such as BBC, *Radio Classic 21*, *KROQ* and others; as well as social media, including most importantly the fan-created database *MuseWiki*. The media referred to in the chapter include the *Simulation Theory* LP Deluxe Edition (Helium 3, Warner, A&E Records, Globalist Industries, 2018), the *Simulation Theory* film (Pulse Films, Warner, Globalist Industries, 2020), BBC 2 documentary series *The Planets* (2019) and the Netflix sci-fi show *Another Life* (2019).

Methodological Considerations

In the introduction to *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music*, Richard Middleton compiles a list of five critical points that musicological analysis of popular songs should avoid: 1) “a tendency to use inappropriate or loaded [musical-theoretical] terminology,” 2) a disproportionate attention to pitch structures and harmony but a poor coverage of rhythm and timbre; 3) “notational centrality”

or a tendency “to equate the music with a score,” 4) a formalist tendency “to reduce meaning to effects of structure, ignoring emotional and corporeal aspects,” and 5) monologic listening that privileges the analyst’s perspective and ignores the variability of possible “aural readings” and versions of a piece of music. Middleton asserts,

In addressing these issues, the best ‘new musicology’ of pop has grasped the need to hear harmony in new ways, to develop new models for rhythmic analysis, to pay attention to nuances of timbre and pitch inflection, to grasp textures and forms in ways that relate to generic and social function, to escape from ‘notational centrality’ (Middleton 4).

Our analysis follows these guidelines as closely as possible. Instead of advanced terminology, we use only basic music vocabulary and mostly describe the musical component by means of intuitively accessible images, metaphors and analogies. We pay equal attention to rhythmic and timbral components of music as well as to harmony. We prefer comparing the different versions of the song performance to comparing scores or tabs. We dedicate many paragraphs to the affective background of the lyrics and the thematization of corporeality in the narratives around “The Void.” Finally, we take account of the perceptual variability of the piece and consider different responses on it.

The structure outlined in our introduction reflects our belief that a piece of pop/rock music is an artifice whose identity cannot be reduced to lyrics and music alone but involves complex factors of subjective responses, discursive determination and mediation. Along with Georgina Born we maintain that:

Music is never singular, but always a multiplicity; it exists only in and through its multiple and changing mediations, in the guise of such assemblages. There is no musical object or text—whether sounds, score or performance—that stands outside mediation; just as, we might say, there

is no musical subject that exists prior to an engagement with the musical object in the act of listening (Born, “Listening, Mediation, Event” 88).

We are far from believing that music as such either follows or can be analyzed by analogy with linguistic codes (“Music, Modernism and Signification” 166). By talking about the meaning of “The Void” as a unity of the lyrics and music, we imply the possibility of its articulation to cultural codes, tropes and clichés that condition its listening as well as to a degree its composition. The musical elements of “The Void” in/by themselves do not mean what we say they mean. All meanings we assign to sound, rhythm, harmony etc. in this chapter are secondary, derivative and metaphoric. As Middleton puts it, “[M]usical meaning cannot be detached from the discursive, social and institutional frameworks which surround, mediate, and [...] produce it” (Middleton 9). In order to understand music better, we should account for the dynamic aspect of the production of these frameworks through cultural communication. In this regard, according to Frith, “[I]n examining the aesthetics of popular music we need to reverse the usual academic argument: the question is not how a piece of music, a text, ‘reflects’ popular values, but how—in performance—it produces them” (Frith 270).

Obviously, to establish how popular music produces values, we should combine the study of its semiotics with the study of audiences and other relevant subjects, which we also include in the proposed analysis. Meanwhile, there always persists the irreducible factor of individual listening and response to the music which significantly impacts the analyst’s judgment. As Walser argues, “one must be able to experience—not just discern—differences among musical texts, in order to avoid imposing an interpretation of monotony and singularity of meaning that fans and musicians do not recognize” (Walser and Berger xxiii). However, Frith convincingly objects that the personal reaction to a piece of music can be sufficiently determined by its comparative difference from other pieces: “We all hear the music we like as something special, as

something that defies the mundane, takes us ‘out of ourselves,’ puts us somewhere else. ‘Our music’ is, from this perspective, special not just with reference to other music but, more important, to the rest of life” (Frith 275).

Also, contemporary musicologists agree that the proper attention must be paid to the corporeal experience of both listening and playing. As Frith argues, “music making and music listening, . . . are bodily matters; they involve what one might call social movements. In this respect, musical pleasure is not derived from fantasy—it is not mediated by daydreams—but is experienced directly: music gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be” (274). Walser confirms that his study of the heavy metal guitar convinced him of the value of this genre as a research object more than any critical musicological theory or ideological agenda (Walser and Berger xxi, 1–2). We touch upon this peculiar element of music making in our discussion of the meaning of Muse’s transition from guitar-based to synth sound and the combination of the human-played and programmed components of “The Void.”

In all aforementioned senses, the text of the song will never coincide with its lyrics transcribed. Its text is created through interpretation or better, as Middleton suggests, in a dialogue:

The interpretation can function only as a form of *dialogue*. . . Many writers are beginning to see pop songs in this light. Their meanings are produced through dialogue at many levels: within the textures, voices, structures, and style-alliances of the individual musical event; between producers and addressees: between text, style, and genre and other texts, styles, genres: between discourses, musical and other; between interpretations, mediators, and other involved social actors (Middleton 13).

Obviously, the main problem with this vision of a text is that it does not provide a researcher with clear guidelines for safeguarding the text of interpretation from infinite expansion. The fabric of meaningful connections that could resonate with the reader

must be cut at a certain point. Therefore, the researcher takes on the double risk of deciding about the reasonable limits of interpretation and the direction in which it should extend (10). Our decision to accompany the reading of “The Void” by Muse with speculative ideas of Lacan, Stiegler and Badiou attempts such an extension of its text through a dialogue. The dialogical approach allows us to suspend, at least temporarily, the elitist disciplinary segregation and subordination of theoretic and other, disputably inferior, types of cultural production and consider both theoretic texts and musical pieces equally valuable in terms of the general processes of semiosis. Along with bringing these three intellectuals into discussion, we are going to touch upon some societal and political issues thematized in the Muse songs. Instead of arguing about the derivative or imitative nature of this thematization, our goal is to get closer to the aspect in which “The Void,” to paraphrase Frith’s apt remark, “doesn’t represent values but lives them” experientially and performatively. As he writes,

the critical issue, in other words, is not meaning and its interpretation—musical appreciation as a kind of decoding—but experience and collusion: the ‘aesthetic’ [of popular songs] describes a kind of self-consciousness, a coming together of the sensual, the emotional, and the social as performance. In short, music doesn’t represent values but lives them” (Frith 272).

Perhaps an individual perspective might help to explain our choice of the object in the light of Frith’s suggestion. My familiarity with the Muse songs and, precisely, “The Void” began quite recently and coincided with my systemic reading of Stiegler’s most recent and insistently alarming works on digital disruption and the Anthropocene. At the time, “The Void” provided me with an aesthetic, sensual form in which I could experience and, in a sense, live through the overwhelming pessimism and nihilism discussed by Stiegler as well as reconcile with the image of the positive futurity that

he proposes under the name *neganthropy*. While this meeting of theory and rock music was a mere coincidence, its further connection to the theoretical problems with which I have been preoccupied for the last few years appeared quite logical. As Frith's opposition of *living* to *representing* implies, the subject of music is not one of knowledge but rather "self-consciousness" (Frith's term), whose being/living coincides with and consists in making/listening music as a real process. This consideration makes me think that the Stieglerian neganthropic hope lived by means of music perfectly describes the (artistic) subject of truth conceptualized by Badiou. Consequently, the *void* under whose aegis this subject manifests itself in the piece presents a real puzzle. Prior to any hermeneutic work, I could perceive how the very texture of the song, its structure and accompaniment contoured some imperceptible void, drifted around, gravitated towards and eventually faded into it. I describe this in detail in sections III and VI. The speculative systems of Badiou and Lacan, in which it is a pivotal concept, are indispensable for linking up these findings with theoretical articulations of the structural, or better, *structuring* function of the void. Thus, the anatomy of the subject behind "The Void" has become an overarching topic that determined the meeting of these otherwise independent thinkers and their concepts in a case study dedicated to a pop song.

Muse and "The Void"

Below, we reproduce the lyrics of "The Void" available on MuseWiki, the main fan website and the largest database.²⁹ The division into verses, choruses and the bridge is ours.

The Void

Verse 1: They'll say, no one can see us

That we're estranged and all alone

They believe nothing can reach us
And pull us out of the boundless gloom

Chorus: They're wrong

They're wrong

They're wrong

Yeah baby, they're wrong

They're wrong

They're wrong

Verse 2: They'll say the sun is dying

And the fragile can't be saved

And the cold, it will devour us

And we won't rise up and slay giants

Chorus

Bridge: It takes a leap of faith

To awake from these delusions

You are the coder and avatar

A star

Verse 3: They'll say, no one will find us

That we're estranged and all alone

They believe nothing can reach us

And pull us out of the boundless gloom

Chorus

Matthew Bellamy (vocal, guitar, piano, keyboard, keytar, synthesizer), Dominic Howard (drums, percussion, synthesizer) and Christopher Wolstenholme (bass, vocal, guitar,

keyboard, keytar) met and started the band when they were in high school in Teignmouth (a small town in south-west England) in the early nineties. Since 1999 they have released eight studio albums, among them the 2011 Grammy Award winner *Resistance*. Their compositions are widely used in media, including soundtracks to motion pictures, TV shows, and video games. Along with a bright recognizable style on the contemporary rock stage, Muse are famous for their experimentation with sound effects and equipment. In addition to countless modifications of studio settings and appliances, they keep on testing and using new electronic instruments such as keytars, guitars with inbuilt touchpad-controlled effects units, as well as native percussion instruments. However, *Simulation Theory* is probably from the fan perspective the least interesting and most hated Muse album in this regard.

According to the musicians, *Simulation Theory* is their first album for which they did not have a general concept while recording. Their decision was to change the priorities and to focus more on singles as independent and self-sufficient pieces. Thus, four singles were released during the year and a half before the album's release and at least a year prior to the announcement of its title. When the first single "Dig Down" came out in early 2017 and Muse were asked about their plans for the new album, Howard commented that they did not have any yet. He added that they believed the album as a form was probably becoming a thing of the past while releasing and selling singles should become the dominant tendency in the music industry.³⁰ Nonetheless, the new album was eventually compiled and like all Muse's previous albums was linked to a common topic, which this time embraced simulation, virtual reality, AI and algorithms.

As a result, the audience had no common preconceptions about the first four compositions and could interpret them more openly than those that were to come out along with the album. Among the latter was "The Void." It plays 4:44 minutes, and this duration feels optimal. The lyrics consist of three verses, a chorus and a

bridge between the second chorus and the third verse. Slightly altered, the third verse repeats the first one. The song is sung by Bellamy in a soft tenor, and its album version includes no backing vocals.³¹ Except for the dynamic bridging part with the main tempo redoubled, the tempo of the composition is adagio. The instrumental part of the main version mainly employs synthesizers that emulate synth arpeggios, the bass line, the strings parts and the piano. We can also hear real drums and, probably, a real bass guitar that doubles the synth bass. The extended or deluxe version of the album includes a synth and an acoustic versions of the song. The accompaniment for the acoustic version sounds like it was played on a grand acoustic piano.

Bellamy probably wrote the song in 2017, and it was recorded in Los Angeles with producer Rich Costey. Except for a lyric video, no music video has been so far produced for the song. Meanwhile, when it comes to its uses in media, the track can be heard in the intro to 2019 BBC 2 documentary series *The Planets* and the 2019 Netflix sci-fi show *Another Life*, where it accompanies the culmination of the tenth and final episode titled *Hello* of the first season, aired on July 25, 2019.

Only a fragment of the piano version of the song was publicly performed on the day of the album's presentation. Despite its warm reception among the band's fans, Muse have not included it in most playlists of their promotional world tour, and there are only three known or documented occasions of its live performance, one in Amsterdam and two in London (O2 Arena) on September 12, 14 and 15, 2019, respectively. Subsequently, the video from one of the London concerts was included in the *Simulation Theory* film. For some unknown reason, Muse did not seem to see much commercial or promotional value in the composition.

"The Void" closes two diachronic sequences of songs. The list of tracks on the album *Simulation Theory* represents one of them. In this list, the song is immediately preceded by a piece called "Dig Down," while the first track on the album is "Algorithm." The order of the singles and music videos released before the LP establishes

the second sequence, by which the reception of “The Void” could be prepared. This one begins with “Dig Down” followed by “Thought Contagion,” “Something Human” and “Pressure.” On the day of the presentation of the album, three music videos were released: “Algorithm,” “Break It To Me” and “Blockades.” Noteworthy is the fact that in one of the early interviews when the concept of the album was still in development, Bellamy mentioned that it would include ten tracks,³² while upon release it would include eleven. There is no information whether the initial plan was to close the album with “Dig Down” and whether that first track list included “The Void.” In any case, we assume that there is some meaningful relationship, a tension between “Dig Down” and “The Void” worthy of consideration.

“Dig Down” is a simple inspirational song that sounds like evangelical gospel. It promises that in dark times it is still possible to find a way out. Some of its lines very likely have a political subtext and may refer to the beginning of Trump’s presidency in 2017: “When god decides to look the other way and a clown takes the throne / We must find a way.” The music video is stylized like a combat video game whose protagonist is featured by Lauren Wasser, a female model and athlete known for a quite tragic background history involving the amputation of both legs. In short, the overall message of “Dig Down” is deeply emotionally charged, challenging and provocative. It is meant to be sung by a crowd united by the euphoria of co-belonging. All this strongly contrasts with the loneliness conveyed by the first lines of “The Void”—which we discuss in more detail in the following section. After “Dig Down,” which celebrates the spirit of commonality, “The Void” plunges us into a calm introspection.

Integral Reading

The scarce information that Muse have given about “The Void” mostly concerns the title and background of its creation. Almost nothing in their commentaries explains in detail the text or music. When one of the interviewers compared it to an earlier Muse song “Space Dementia”³³ and asked the bandmates to explain what the electronic and synth music means to them, Bellamy commented: “Space Dementia” has this idea of being lost in space and drifting off; and that’s very much connected to “The Void” which has the same concept of humans being lost in space and human fragility in space. . . .”³⁴ As we may find, this image of a lost Earth or alternatively a lost image of Earth completes the depressive background conveyed in the verses, against which there persists a daring affirmation of a hope in the bridge. As Bellamy and Howard imply in the same interview, the synthesizer sounds are intended to induce some uncanny and alienating feeling. All the aforementioned space-travel references notwithstanding, the electronic programmed arpeggios and basses unambiguously stand for the artificial, technological, cybernetic.

Let us take a closer look at the basic elements of the lyrics and sound of the piece.

The lyrics have the form of an address. Its imaginary receiver addressed as “baby” in the chorus is somebody with whom the sender is tied by a commonality expressed by the pronoun us. In turn, the content of this address stages an imaginary dispute with some unspecified “they” whose message is recited in the verses while the response is given in the chorus and the bridge. The general message can be preliminarily summarized as follows: “Those who try to discourage us and consider us hopeless and helpless are wrong; and you have to accept yourself as a true and active author of yourself and your life.”

As we can see, the chorus “They’re wrong” is a concise expression of protest against the nihilistic or pessimistic standpoint with regard to our destiny, provided that we identify ourselves with the “us” of the text. Since the objection is given in direct

speech, we assume that it expresses the narrator's position. Two iterations of "their" words followed by the negation preface a bridge that delivers an affirmative message. If there were no third iteration afterward, one could suppose that the controversy between the verses and the chorus prepared the final resolution of the conflict in the bridge. However, when the bright and enthusiastic part culminates, the message continues and ends on the negation.

How should we understand this dialectics that offers no apparent progress? The first fact we might take into account is that, chronologically, the development of the text repeated, and was predetermined by, the development of the melody. In one interview, Bellamy explained that he first came up with the arpeggios and hence the chord progression, while the words came second.³⁵ This means that, to a certain degree, the lyrics interpret the musical structure, which, in this case, 1) presumed the change of key to the parallel major and a tempo acceleration in the third quarter of the composition, and then 2) in the outro, slowing down and a return to the initial harmonic pattern. The repetition of the verse and chorus is a return to the main key and tempo of the composition thanks to which it sounds complete. In short, Bellamy let his musical intuition prevail over and direct the verbal message.

If we leave aside the bridge for a moment, we see that the song formally resembles an elegy. Generally, it places us in some archetypal "last time," the time devoid of epic achievements, an "after-event," the end of the world, the decline. The verses can be read as designed to narrate the tragic destiny of the lamented one(s) and predict that the memory of them must soon disappear without a trace. The chorus apparently objects to this scenario with a commitment to not let that be. Along these lines, it is possible to consider the use of *us* as a very common rhetorical or stylistic technique, namely, speaking on behalf of the fallen or deceased. The impression of an elegiac genre is aided by the repetition of the first verse at the end. This recurrence renders the verse a ritual formula meant for repeating. Thus, if listening to this composition

can immerse us into melancholic contemplation or induce tragic feelings, this can be the effect of its design, which reproduces the elements of epic poetry.

The first verse introduces us to the drama of our existential abandonment, fundamental loneliness and alienation from each other. We are doomed to disappearing without a trace in the infinite flow of time. Our fate is the irreversible inertia that pulls us towards nonbeing. We may notice that this tragedy of our fate is approached here mostly in terms of the crisis of communication and mediation: the connection between individuals failed; “we’re estranged;” no visual information and/or no optical channel is available; “no one can see us;” the place we are in has no connection with other places; “nothing can reach us.” The lyrics put us in some unreal, empty, introspective space where everyone is on one’s own, suspended in the middle of nowhere and gradually sucked into nothingness (“the boundless gloom”). This, for instance, could describe the other side of our everyday social life and communication where, at the end of the day, we all fail to establish a genuine and meaningful connection with anyone. As we will shortly see, verse two would portray the misfortune of living from a different angle. The common message of all verses is that there is no hope for salvation and no event will interrupt the inevitable.

The message of the second verse is organized around a few striking figures such as *the dying sun*, *the all-devouring cold* and *slaying giants*. While verse one stresses alienation and the impossibility of a momentous encounter, verse two brings forward people’s inability to perform a life-changing action or to help themselves. We see how the last lines suggest that uprisings will avail of nothing and “we won’t... slay giants.” We may read this biblical reference³⁶ as a simple farewell to the myths about heroes and the age of revolutions. The contemporary giants, e.g., climate change, global capitalism, the decline of human civilization, etc., cannot be fought against and defeated. As our discussion in the following sections will show, by the lines “the sun is dying” and “the cold... will devour us,” Bellamy most likely alludes to an

ultimate power in the universe against which nothing can stand: entropy. It will eventually “devour” not only “the fragile”—life, our works and inventions, the things and relationships we value and endeavor to build and maintain—but also the sun that gives us light and warmth. This commentary should give us some understanding of how ambitiously the last line and the chorus that follows it sound together. To paraphrase: “Those who claim that we are unable to do anything about the problems of such a scale are wrong.”

Although it does not close the entire message, the most important function of the bridge is to break the pattern and introduce an alternative. It is an alternative message or a message about some alternative possibility with regard both to the nihilistic tone of the verses and the negative reaction to it in the chorus. This alternative message consists of two main propositions. One proposition identifies all statements made throughout the verses as delusions. Another one is the proposition of an awakening leap of faith that should reveal new possibilities.

The bridge and the remaining part employ two alternative models of time that radicalize their opposition. As we have already seen, the time of the verses and chorus is cyclical and finite. It is dominated by repetition, and its end is known in advance. Like a compulsive delusion, the eternal return of the same, the inertia or rigidity of the archetype of existential finitude haunts and poisons our individual and collective concepts of living. In contrast to it, the time of the bridge is open and nonrepetitive like the timespan of a risky leap into the unknown. This is the meaning of the trope *a leap of faith*.

The minute difference between *see* in the first verse—“They’ll say no one can *see* us”—and *find* in its repetition in the end changes the global framework in which we should understand the situation. The word *find* introduces another shade of despair. It is no longer a situation when everyone is left alone and rendered insignificant to others. *Find* brings in the assumption that someone might still be looking for us in

our state of radical loneliness and lost contact with others. However, even if there were someone who could “pull us out of the boundless gloom,” there was no chance that they would ever find us. In more metaphysical terms, this might also mean that there will always remain something that is impossible to reach and save in us, i.e., that against all attempts to improve our nature, something in it will always drive us into the darkness.

The piece begins with a sullenly humming wind in the background and a middle-register synth arpeggio with an unusual alternating rhythmical signature: after one bar in 12/8 there follows one bar in 4/8. Four repeating triplets of the first bar induce an expectation of the further continuation of this pattern, but it only returns after a short interruption caused by the quadruple bar. This futuristic eighties-style tone is reminiscent of space-travel movies’ soundtracks, in which the artificial purity of the sound simultaneously connotes the emptiness of the vast cosmic space, where only stars are blinking and pass by in the spacecraft’s front-view window, and the discrete visual and sonic signals that are issued in some abstract patterns by the interfaces inside the cabin.

Against this cool and lifeless background, Bellamy’s voice sounds isolated to connote the loneliness expressed in the initial lines of the lyrics. However, in the chorus, the instrumental part develops. Right at the word *wrong*, a synth bass enters and fills the chorus with series of sixteenth notes reminiscent of the sound of a helicopter or some powerful engine. The general rhythmical pattern becomes simpler and uniform. Ambient violins immediately join the bass and displace the synth arpeggio to the background. These modifications make the mantra “They’re wrong” sound slightly darker, and render the background of the chorus slightly intimidating compared to the elegiac mood of the verse.

With the second verse, the synth bass stops and a bass drum begins to punctuate the composition with soft syncopation. Each of Bellamy’s lines is now followed by a

melodic response played by the strings. The altered accompaniment reproduces the elements of the style of sentimental dramas of the sixties or seventies. All of this connotes the anticipation of an inevitable parting. Then follows the chorus which, in the context of the second verse, objects to the supposition that we are hopeless and doomed.

The bridge consists of an instrumental and vocal parts. As we have already mentioned, on the vocal part the key and tempo change. However, as it begins we hear a dark and dramatic instrumental part that bridges the main minor key with the parallel major key. The bridge reaches its most sublime point when the harmony changes back from major to minor at the transition from “delusions” to the line “You are the coder/And avatar/A star.” Furthermore, the chords on “avatar” and “a star” repeat the theme of the chorus as if this part were intended to hint at an answer as to why “they’re wrong.”

Instead of pre-programmed synth arpeggios, the last verse is accompanied by piano. This adds to the recontextualization of the content of the first verse. Now these lines sound out against neither the sterile background of the cosmic ether nor a technologically precise imitation of human playing, but rather against the melody actually performed by human hands. However, in our opinion, the most dramatic change occurs in the chorus. Now, the synth bass does not dictate rhythmic sixteenths as previously but progresses through a pattern with varying speed. It begins rapidly, then slows down up to one half of the tempo at the middle of the bar and afterward accelerates again. Previously, the bass on the chorus interrupted the hypnotizing tranquility of the verses and introduced a formal opposition between the static (verses) and the dynamic (chorus). It connoted the presence of something active and strong. Now that it repeatedly fades out and in, it reminds one of the signal of a stand-alone radio beacon. This signal sent into the boundless nothingness receives no response.

Which exact musical component does the title connote? The most obvious answer is the first verse due to its minimalistic accompaniment and melancholic vibe. However, the last chords of the last chorus probably leave us with another void, the silence into which the pulsating synth tone fades out. We argue that a meta-message emerges with this ending. This message concerns not only the song but also the album's concept in general. The last track of the album, whose central theme is *simulation*, ends with a looped and synthesized, i.e., artificially generated tone. The last word of the song, "wrong," uttered by a human voice falls on, merges with and dissolves into, the sound of a machine capable of simulating any natural sound. Does it not imply that, beyond simulation, there is only a void, nothingness in the place of the natural or human? In a certain sense, the negation at the end of "The Void" makes us wonder not only what its last word is but also to whom it belongs. The humble beauty of this piece lies in the way it leaves the answer suspended: one day, the response may suddenly come.

Embrace Technology

To explain his main motives while working on *Simulation Theory*, Bellamy compares it to the mood of their previous studio album *Drones* (2015): "The last album featured a lot of my anxiety about technology and my fear of AI and robots. Almost at the end of this last album I thought to myself that resistance is futile. We cannot stop the rise of technology. So, what we might do is to embrace it."³⁷ Indeed, the compositions on *Drones* manifest an utter pessimism about both the present and future of our coexistence with the technologies that embody nothing else but our obsession with absolute control and destruction. Most of their titles speak for themselves: "Dead Inside," "Psycho," "Mercy," "Reapers," "The Handler," "Drones." While the texts are dark and provocative, the music—predominantly heavy and guitar-based—completes

the overall depressive picture. As Bellamy notes, the new album was designed to convey a different message: in the technification of the world, we have passed the point of no return and must learn how to hold to the true in a world of simulations. Thus, the first rationale that Muse provide of their search for a new concept concerns Bellamy's subjective urge to overcome the fixation on fear and articulate a more balanced position with regard to the alarming trends in the technological development of our societies.

We may notice that, within the framework of this personalized narrative about individual anxiety, the invention of a positive image of hope, the manifestation of a personal attitude to reestablish it against all pessimism, is promoted as the main goal of the work on the new album. The discursive construction of this image or concept relies on the idea that one type or vision of technology, i.e., associated with the generation of simulations, can become a remedy for, or alternatively a means of, escaping from the anxiety about other aspects of technology. In the next section, we will discuss the speculative premise of this idea.

Now, let us see how politically colored motives counterbalance this utterly personal techno-phobic approach.

In 2014-2016, at least in the USA, the perspective of unemployment caused by robotization had become reality. The massive replacement of human workers with automation had occurred in many industries and provoked a negative reaction, which took the form of workers' protests and hot public debates. In part, Muse's *Drones* was a reflection of this alarming trend too. As a band, Muse belong to a generation who, while growing up and entering their early adulthood, could experience and were affected by the accelerated computerization of society and everyday life. Remarkably, Bellamy and Howard became friends when Dom found out that Matt had an Amiga 500 gaming computer and got permission to come around at the Bellamy's to play. These were the early nineties, they were teenagers, and, in a few years, the spread

of the Internet and digital media would become the dominant technological trend that allegedly marks our entering to the digital age and advances the globe towards an information civilization. Bellamy recalls: “When the band started, it was right around the time when the Internet was everywhere, . . . We’ve seen this huge growth in the world: constant innovation, tech, speed of computing, the introduction of Internet gaming, phones.”³⁸ Their very first experience with recording and promotion would coincide with the period of an intensive transition of the sound production and entertainment industries to digital standards. The young bandmates would face the need to master both classic analog and new digital consoles, data formats, and storage media. Bellamy explains Muse’s reaction and attitude as follows:

Our industry, the music industry, was one of the first industries to be hit with this buzzword, ‘automation’ . . . You hear people talking about automation and AI taking away industries, jobs and so on. That’s something the music industry experienced very early on, and it’s now starting to hit other industries – everything from car manufacturing to military strategic decisions. It’s starting to creep in and threaten a lot of peoples’ jobs. I think that’s why a lot of those themes in the earlier Muse records were quite negative about technology. We experienced that feeling – working for years playing instruments and then you go to a festival and someone just opens a laptop and hits the space bar, and they’re headlining a festival. I think people are going to start experiencing that in all kinds of industries. People who have trained for years as journalists and so on might suddenly find that an AI is writing articles. It’s quite a jarring feeling.³⁹

The song “New Born” (recorded in 2000) exemplifies their reaction to the early expansion of computerization and informatization that already then had felt overwhelming: “Link it to the world/Link it to yourself/Stretch it like a birth squeeze/The love for what you hide/The bitterness inside/Is growing like a new born.” *New born* is a

curious figure for the unknown emergent feeling or inner experience engendered in an interaction with the technology that not only connects us to each other and the world but also mysteriously links our destiny to its own. To the twenty-two-year-old Bellamy, identifying and conceiving of the nature of these personal changes was as impossible to predict as the future of a child. As of 2018, Muse's diagnosis of the situation changes to: "Burn like a slave/Churn like a cog/We are caged in simulations/Algorithms evolve/Push us aside/And render us obsolete." This is the beginning of "Algorithm," the track that opens both the album and the film *Simulation Theory*.

In his 1997 bestseller *The Innovator's Dilemma*, economist Clayton M. Christensen introduced the concept of disruptive innovation which thereafter defined the agenda of the proponents of the so-called *digital disruption*. In *The Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction*, Christensen portrays disruptive innovation as favorable for advancing the market economy and business:

A disruptive technology or disruptive innovation is an innovation that helps create a new market and value network, and eventually goes on to disrupt an existing market and value network. The term is used in business and technology literature to describe innovations that improve a product or service in ways that the market does not expect. Although the term *disruptive technology* is widely used, *disruptive innovation* seems a more appropriate term in many contexts since few technologies are intrinsically disruptive; rather, it is the business model that the technology enables that creates the disruptive impact (Christensen).

The proponents of digital disruption, such as Esther Dyson, Kevin Kelly, Clay Shirky, Ray Kurzweil, Don Tapscott, Anthony Williams, Jeff Jarvis, Peter Wang, and others, argue that digital media bring dramatic yet necessary societal changes that now affect not only financial institutions but practically all traditional social and political institutions. Furthermore, the impact of this technological wave can be easily seen in

people's general disbelief and even distrust in the traditional forms of social authority.

Bellamy's explanations above give us a particular perspective on the impact of computerization as such a disruptive technology. Despite all their positive economic effects, disruptive technologies inevitably bring about mixed subjective reactions such as confusion and anxiety. However, some thinkers of technology believe that the negative impact is significantly deeper. Stiegler argues that:

Disruption renders will, wherever its source, obsolete in advance: it always arrives too late. What is thereby attained is an extreme stage of rationalization, forming a threshold, that is, a limit. What lies beyond this limit remains unknown: it destroys reason not only in the sense that rational knowledge finds itself eliminated by proletarianization, but in the sense that individuals and groups, losing the very possibility of existing (for their existence depends on being able to express their will), losing therefore all reason for living, become literally mad, and tend to despise life—their own and that of others. The result is the risk of a global social explosion consigning humanity to a nameless barbarism (Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption* 8).

We should understand this pessimistic assessment in the context of Stiegler's general vision of the intergenerational communication of knowledge. He maintains that normally the knowledge accrued and modified by one generation is objectified—transindividualized—in artifices, texts and pieces of art that are then passed on to the younger generations (*The Neganthropocene* 34). By interacting with these transmissible media of knowledge, by mastering tools and becoming familiar with artistic forms and other cultural objects, the youth must “translate” them, decode them, reinvent the techniques necessary for handling these objects and thereby individualize and reimagine the world of which they had been a part. Importantly, this deconstruction of the practicalities and know-how embodied in pieces of art and technology involves

a new cycle of transindividuation in which the new generation makes accessible and transmit what they have learned (55). However, these cycles are seriously affected by both the technological and ideological developments within capitalism, while the computer technologies have only intensified the negative tendencies. The individual and group capacity of modeling the future in the form of goal-setting, predictions, inventive ideas, dreams and fantasies is inhibited by the possibility to make predictions through computation which, in turn, is based on pattern-seeking and the distribution of probabilities (*The Age of Disruption* 7). In its fundamentals, this is a reductive counter-inventive scenario. Computational capitalism is disinterested in the stable intergenerational circuits of knowledge transmission; its accelerating rates of innovation focused on data processing render collective knowledge not just obsolete within a single generation but also irrelevant. The informational regime created in contemporary culture eliminates any possibility for individual reflective distancing from the endless current of media events and updates; consciousness loses its intentionality⁴⁰ and passively follows the lead of the media interface (*Technics and Time*, 3 1–7).

Stiegler's alarming message can shed some light on the overall tragic and apocalyptic vision of our social reality conveyed in Muse's songs. At the same time, through the lens of his ideas, we also can see what the generation of musicians like Muse do in terms of the deconstruction not only of pop-culture but more generally the media sphere, public discourse and other instantiations of collective knowledge such as engineering and experimentation with electroacoustics. Although, from their very first steps, the band have been mostly positive and enthusiastic about mastering and implementing innovative high-end sound production, Bellamy mentions conflicting attitudes about the necessity to employ digital technologies in music production: "Sometimes, on albums like *Drones*, I express a little bit of . . . anxiety about how technology's affecting our lives. . . Growing up as a traditional rock band in the age of the programmer and the coder and all that sort of stuff, there's been a bit of resistance

towards that.”⁴¹ He adds that *Simulation Theory* manifested their effort to integrate another logic of the creative process and performance: “There’s a little bit of invention going on with this album—embracing contemporary music rather than trying to shy away from it, . . . something that was in-between the organic and the synthetic.”⁴² These commentaries open an alternative perspective on the meaning and essence of *Simulation Theory* as a work. Now the goal of this work is articulated as the creation of a musical form in which the techniques of the past and present, the organic and synthetic, the played and pre-programmed could be combined into an integral product. Rather than a sensational breakthrough in the world of rock music, the “little bit of invention” in question primarily concerned the bandmates’ collaboration and reinvention of themselves.

Meanwhile, their response to the current situation in industries and the labor market was not limited to the pessimistic manifesto expressed in *Drones*. Throughout multiple interviews during the promotion of *Simulation Theory*, Muse repeated that their major intention was to reinvent and reintroduce the human element in their performance. In particular, this included engaging more live performers—e.g., musicians, dancers and puppeteers—in the shows. In contrast, the imagery and stage settings of the *Drones* promo-tour (2016) consisted of all sorts of flying killing machines, lasers, and military equipment.⁴³ This detail opens the third plane on which the album is narratively constructed and imagined. Precisely, now it is not only an idea and a media product but also a certain form of human relations.

An arcade-game console and VR sets worn by Bellamy and all stage performers became the central elements of the new show. This strategy concerning stage accessories alone could tell a lot about the change in the language with which Muse now promote themselves and/or their message. Not only are digital interfaces and a plethora of other high-tech sound and visual equipment and effects involved in the production of Muse’s up-to-date image, but also human bodies augmented with var-

ious wearables such as futuristic headsets and glowing wires. Although these bodies lack individuality—faces hidden behind masks, the performers are dressed in uniforms and move in a synchronized and uniform fashion—they symbolize dis-identification with a technological object. Previously, the imagery from *Drones* had provided no other object to identify with but a mindless weaponized machine. This identification is especially stressed in the ‘drill’ lines from the opening piece of the show, “Psycho:” “Are you a killing machine? Are you a human drone? - Aye, Sir!” Meanwhile, in *Simulation Theory*, you identify yourself with a body that wears VR glasses, while the line from “Algorithm” reintroduces possibility of subjective distancing from concrete self-images and suggests that we are only “*caught* in simulations.” The role of VR sets in this precise case is similar to that of the sunglasses in John Carpenter’s *They Live* (1988): as Žižek points out in the film *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (2012), they signify the possibility of truth, to which we will return in the last section.

Conspiracies

Another fact that could shed some light on the concept of *Simulation Theory* is that Bellamy often finds inspiration for his songs in intellectual literature, which includes books on modern cosmology, geopolitics, economy, philosophy and psychology. For instance, many Muse compositions of the early 2000s reveal that he has been a dedicated reader of *Hyperspace* (1994) and *The Elegant Universe* (1999) by the physicists and popularizers of science Michio Kaku and Brian Greene respectively. Other examples include Zbigniew Brzezinski’s *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), Kathleen Taylor’s *Brainwashing* (2004), Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s *The Black Swan* (2007) and *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) by Daniel Kahneman. At the same time, some of Muse’s prominently dystopian figures and rhetoric are clearly drawn on conspiracy theories, such as Zecharia Sitchin’s *The 12th Planet* (1976), John Perkins’ *Confessions of an Economic*

Hit Man (2004), Webster Tarpley's *9/11 Synthetic Terror* (2005), Jim Marrs' *Rule by Secrecy* (2001), and works of fiction such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), Will Self's *My Idea of Fun* (1993), Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006).⁴⁴

Most directly, the title *Simulation Theory* was inspired by the ideas of a philosopher Nick Bostrom. In 2003, he published a widely discussed paper "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?" where he proposes a hypothesis that we might be living within a simulated reality created by superior intelligence. In his more recent book *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (2014), he further speculates on the possibility for AI to develop into such a superintelligence. Actually, the derivative concept of Muse's album came second and to a greater degree inspired the trio's subsequent promo tour of 2019 and the 2020 tour-based film. Bellamy directly refers to Bostrom's hypothesis⁴⁵ and admits that this futuristic idea allowed him to imagine a positive scenario involving the progress in AI technologies. Precisely, if one day these technologies become capable of simulating the laws of physics, then changing reality towards its better versions should also become possible.⁴⁶ However, Bellamy clearly indicates that his current perspective is different.⁴⁷ His concern is simulation as a product of social communication, the made-up conditions of coexistence that people collectively maintain and impose on each other. In this sense, simulation has prominently but not necessarily dystopic features. Muse's *Simulation Theory* manifests a wish to confront this dystopia embodied in propaganda, conspiracy theories, fundamentalism, and innumerable collectively shared delusions, mostly by refusing to cede to the power of algorithms which have become a powerful tool for the manipulation of people's thinking and behavior. To this, Bellamy adds in one interview: "The album's concept is kind of about being inside a computer game that you need to try to escape from."⁴⁸

Let us briefly dwell on this note about escaping from a computer game. According

to the common interpretation, video games represent one of the most addictive ways of escaping from the real world to virtual or simulated realities. Bellamy admits that he is susceptible to such escapism and implies that *Simulation Theory* can be understood as a means of working through it. Since 2014, through the efforts of companies such as Oculus VR, Sony, Valve and others, the new generation of VR headsets was introduced to the video-game market. Bellamy has become one of the enthusiastic users of this technology and has mentioned that playing multiplayer games has become one of the sources of his belief that in the virtual environment people can be nicer to each other than in everyday life. Another similar revelation was his experience of participating in Burning Man festival⁴⁹ during the work on the album in 2017. We may find that both events in the Muse frontman's life clearly illustrate his inner struggle with the rejection of reality in its traumatic or anxiety-provoking manifestations.

Muse's flirtation with conspiracy theories has always been a privileged topic among their fans. *Artificial superintelligence* has become a figure next to other relevant references involving the global political-economic elite and even secret alien overlords. The fans' reaction to "The Void" in particular reveals the degree to which their perception of *Simulation Theory* has been prepared or informed by the expectation of some analogy between Muse's previous and new messages. For instance, symptomatically, the first tweets that appeared on the album's release compared "The Void" with "Exogenesis I, II, III" among other closer tracks from Muse's previous albums.⁵⁰ "Exogenesis" is a symphonic tripartite piece that closes the LP *Resistance* (2009) and consists of parts titled "Overture," "Cross Pollination" and "Redemption." Its title refers to the hypothesis of the extraterrestrial origins of life and/or humankind in particular. Although this hypothesis has scientific origins, numerous conspiracy theories and in particular Sitchin's famous myth about planet Nibiru⁵¹ stem from the same idea. The lyrics consist of both a reproach and entreaty addressed to some unnamed creator. Its message can be read as follows: only some extraterrestrial and nonhuman

power can reach out and save us from the disaster we have created on Earth and grant us a new start. Note that while there can be a meaningful way to connect this with the message of “The Void,” there is no obvious similarity in musical style between the compositions. Contrary to some fans’ suggestions, “The Void”—a mixture of synth pop and electronic rock—does not sound like “Exogenesis IV” at all.

The curious fact about “Exogenesis IV,” though, is that a composition with this title actually exists, although Muse have never recorded one. It was Muse’s prank posted on April Fool’s in 2010, eight years before “The Void.” The track contained no valuable material—just a mix of symphonic fragments and Howard’s terrible singing of Radiohead’s “Creep”—while like every part of “Exogenesis” it also had a subtitle, “Salvation.” It could be argued that the concept of salvation is applicable to “The Void” too. However, it is definitely not a salvation in the sense of being reached out and saved by extraterrestrial progenitors.

Their image as conspiracy theorists was created and encouraged, however ironically and self-mockingly, by Muse themselves in the period from 2006 to 2009 when they released the albums *Black Holes and Revelations* and *Resistance*. Indeed, these LPs contain allusions to some controversial concepts concerning secret alien intruders that rule our civilization, as the titles of the compositions such as “Exo-Politics” (2006) and “Exogenesis I-III” (2009) imply. In addition, UFOs and other sci-fi and futuristic imagery decorated their live shows during the *Resistance* promo tour. No surprise that their new album was immediately identified in the same vein, as the following remark by a GQ columnist shows: “*Simulation Theory* is just the latest conspiracy Muse has been happy to disappear inside.”⁵² It should be mentioned, though, that no matter how far Muse went in their experimentation with this subject, the final message has always concerned exclusively human problems and power dynamics which the fantasy figures helped to articulate and intonate. The song titled “Exo-Politics” from the 2006 album states this as follows: “When the Zetas⁵³ fill the skies, it’s our leaders in

disguise./Fully loaded satellites/Will conquer nothing but our minds.” In other words, conspiracy theories of this kind are just a distorting mirror of our political reality.

We may assume that Muse’s association with UFO and alien imagery was the main reason that both BBC 2 and Netflix producers chose “The Void” for the soundtrack to *The Planets* and *Another Life* respectively.

The 2019 documentary series *The Planets* relates the discoveries about the Solar system already made or still anticipated. The first verse and the last iteration of the last chorus of “The Void” are used for its intro. The video begins with the images of Solar system exploration: the space modules’ landing on the planets and moons, etc. However, by the time the lines “They believe nothing can reach us,/And pull us out of the boundless gloom./They’re wrong” are sung, we already see massively catastrophic events, such as the collision of planets and asteroids, explosions, etc. Thus, together with the song, the video produces an implicit warning: “Although other planets are lifeless, this does not mean that nothing is going on there or that nothing can happen to us. An asteroid or some cosmic-scale cataclysm can and one day certainly will reach us.”

The 2019-20 sci-fi series *Another Life* depicts our civilization’s near future, when people are already at the preparation stage of colonizing other planets, e.g., they have technologies for long space travels and develop pilot programs, train future colonists teams etc. The show begins with the appearance of a UFO in the sky and its consequent landing somewhere in USA, a sudden revelation of the existence of the extraterrestrial life. However, as no life form comes out from the vehicle or attempts to establish contact with earthlings, Earth sends an expedition towards the presumable point of the departure of this object. “The Void” is used in the soundtrack almost in full length in the tenth episode of season one in the following context. After months of fruitless attempts to establish contact with them through their gigantic artifact on Earth, the aliens finally send a message to humankind and claim that they are friendly.

At the same time, the crew sent to outer space to explore their origin discovers a conflicting truth about them. Precisely, the song is played along a dramatic series of events. While TVs are broadcasting the message “We are friends” from the aliens, the artifact’s entrance is opening and, in space, the space-mission crew is witnessing the alien battleships destroy a planet along with all its inhabitants. The integral message of the song in this context is again quite grim: “We humans have thought we are safe on our planet, but we were wrong.” Moreover, in this sequence, the message of the bridging verse “It takes a leap of faith. . .” becomes extremely confusing as it overlaps with the images of the planet’s explosion.

Certainly, the song deserves a deeper and more adequate reading. Despite its openness to different interpretations, “The Void” is definitely not primarily about the cosmic dangers that await humankind. As we have demonstrated in section II, its message cannot be reduced to something like “The world is bigger than we think” or “Reality will ruin any misconception.”

Among other tracks to which fans likened “The Void” and which have some relation to conspiracy theories, MuseWiki mentions “Ruled by Secrecy” (album *Absolution*, 2003) and “Isolated Systems” (album *The 2nd Law*, 2012). The theme of the first piece is life in a society whose inhabitants have no control over their own lives “and no one knows who’s in control.” Its protagonist imagines “them”—the anonymous ones who secretly pulls the strings—everywhere, and this turns him to a paranoid maniac caught in a vicious circle of failed attempts to do anything meaningful. Perhaps the motifs of despair and hopelessness make it possible to relate “Ruled by Secrecy” to “The Void.” As for “Isolated Systems,” instead of the issues of alienation and sociogenic existential crisis, it refers to the problem of unsustainable development and the growing entropy, i.e., the escalation of chaotic tendencies and the exhaustion of energies, that affects the global system and consequently people’s lives. *Entropy* is the image that connects it to “The Void” and especially to its second verse that evokes a dying sun, “the fragile”

that “can’t be saved” and the all-devouring cold. Moreover, some insightful parallels between this motif and Stiegler’s concept of negentropy should help us to link up Muse’s pieces even better.

To see how “The Void” intersect with the idea of negentropy, let us make a brief overview of the conceptual milieu of this neologism. We should first consider the terms *entropy* and *negentropy* which refer to the scientific understanding of two opposite tendencies in nature. Entropy is a universal and global tendency that leads the evolution of systems towards a lesser complexity and order, while negentropy is the local emergence of organized or complex structures from simpler and more chaotic entities. According to the second law of thermodynamics, in the systems that neither give out to nor receive anything from outside, also called *isolated systems*, entropy prevails and leads them to the state of least energy, a static equilibrium, while, in contrast, the emergence of complex structures in open systems can occur endlessly. Generally, it is believed that the universe or nature is most likely an isolated system.

Stiegler considers these fundamental processes as two aspects of Becoming in nature that thereby determine a part of the evolution of a more versatile and complex system consisting of our natural environment, the system of social relations and a technological system (*The Age of Disruption* 19, 43–44, 160–163). He argues that while entropy and negentropy tend to prevail over the material conditions of our survival, one of the emergent properties of this bio-socio-techno-system is what we associate with properly human activity on earth which is currently discussed in terms of the Anthropocene. By the latter, Stiegler understands the variety of material traces that human activity, e.g., settlements, natural resources extraction, agriculture etc., has left in our natural habitat since the Paleolithic.

However, he also distinguishes between the two tendencies that he calls *anthropy* and *negentropy*. While, as it is evident from the escalating exhaustion of non-renewable natural resources, *anthropy* concerns an irreversible entropic impact on the

environment and the material conditions of our survival, *neganthropy* in the broadest sense refers to the human capacity of reinventing life (ways of living), inventing new possibilities for life and existence. Importantly, *anthropy* and *neganthropy* are not just the synonyms of *entropy* and *negentropy* applicable to the evolution of the civilization. Stiegler maintains that the Anthropocene is the result of the acceleration by means of technology of both entropic and negentropic potentials of the material systems that we inhabit. Neganthropy employs the same forces and resources yet with a different outcome (*The Neganthropocene* 202–206). The crucial difference between the two forces within the anthropogenic increase of entropy concerns their relation to novelty. Anthropy embodies and manifests a conservative reliance on what is regular, repetitive both in nature and history from which we borrow all our images of the symbolic fiction we call *the Law*. Anthropic thinking capitalizes on the reproducibility of results, hence it respects the dictates of facts, givens and conventions. This attachment to patterns makes the anthropic modus operandi essentially sensitive to statistical trends and norms and thereby reintroduces entropy into the modes of production, systems of material exchange, economies etc. Thus, the overall destiny of all human civilizations is entropy, i.e., they all eventually run out of energy and resources and die. In contrast to this, neganthropy inevitably occurs as hubris (*The Age of Disruption* 11, 52–53). It is a violation of conventions, a disregard to the available means, a distrust of rationalization and Reason in its conventional realization.

In general, Stiegler's concept of neganthropy reflects the impact of systems theory—the interdisciplinary field that originated in mathematics and engineering—on the contemporary humanities and social sciences. The system-theoretical approach embraces the theory of institutions, communication, production, human choice-making and behavior, ecosystems and many other areas. Also, it turns out to be an essential prop of modern neoliberal ideology. The national programs of sustainable development and the prediction models of global economic growth are based on this knowledge.

Think-tank and corporate intellectuals articulate in this lingo strategic visions and futuristic speculations concerning the evolution of the global system, transhumanism, etc.⁵⁴ Noteworthy is the fact that many oppositional and alternative opinions on these topics that are usually stigmatized as conspiracy theories, such as those from Bellamy's reading list, share the same terminology.

Bellamy's familiarity with the concept of entropy and its applications in economics is evident from the title of Muse's 2012 album *The 2nd Law* and the compositions on it such as "Big Freeze," "The 2nd Law: Unsustainable" and "The 2nd Law: Isolated Systems." The first track from it announces the approaching end of the global system: "Wake to see/Your true emancipation is a fantasy/Policies have risen up and overcome the brave/Greatness dies/Unsung and lost invisible to history/Embedded spies/Brainwashing our children to be mean/You don't have long/I am on to you/The time, it has come to destroy/Your supremacy" ("Supremacy"). We may consider "The Void" an implicit intertextual dialogue with that 2012 album. Notably, in "The Void," it is "they" who talk about a "boundless gloom," a dying sun, "the fragile" that "can't be saved" and "the cold" that "will devour us." All this fits with the image of entropy very well. "Their" pessimistic scenario is in conformity with the hegemonic narrative loosely informed by the second law of thermodynamics. However, now Bellamy dissociates himself from the perspective he explored six years before. He promotes a chance for something properly neganthropic, extra-ordinary in Stiegler's terms, that can prove the decadent inferences concerning our hopelessness and helplessness wrong. Accomplishing this requires the hubris of accepting that you are both "the coder and avatar" and, above all, "a star."

As regards the way out of the crisis thematized in the idea of the Anthropocene, Stiegler harshly criticizes the transhumanist and technological versions of it. He maintains that saving the earth and solving the societal problems must be an entirely human enterprise and should neither be sought in nor postponed until the alteration of

human biology or the creation of an artificial superintelligence. In his opinion, both transhumanism and techno-optimism represent two forms of radical nihilism, i.e., the disbelief in the future of humankind. This nihilism reflects our individual and collective inability to produce effective *protentions*. In this context, this term refers to the production of the scenarios of the future which we could bequeath to our successors and in which they could invest instead of yielding to AI or a world of transhumans. As we can see, in the language of the proponents of digital disruption, the same realia are framed as the crisis of the traditional social institutions through which collective knowledge has been communicated for generations.

We assume that the entertainment industry with its conveyor-belt fabrication of media products embodies the anthropic tendency that severely suppresses all genuinely creative neganthropic impulses and, among other things, probably stands behind the automation mentioned by Bellamy too. Stiegler's point about the crisis of the collective ability of protention is applicable to, and made manifest in, the entertainment industry's monopolization of people's fantasies and desires. We may notice that the message of "The Void" as well as *Simulation Theory* is surprisingly coherent with Stiegler's manifesto. Despite Bellamy's alleged "escapism," Muse do not suggest that, for instance, virtual reality is the solution. Quite the opposite, "The Void" calls for a leap of faith and an awakening from the nihilistic delusions that put us in the passive position of those who do nothing else but wait for someone or something to act.

Nostalgia, Escapism, Anxiety

Both the sound and the more optimistic lyrics of the tracks from *Simulation Theory* differ from those of all previous albums. The synth-based musical concept of *Simulation Theory* is considerably softer than the overall brutal sound on *Drones*. Most

probably, this experimentation with the album's sound has a direct relation to the new peak of eighties nostalgia in the pop culture of the time of its production (2017-18). In particular, this trend is evident in the success of Netflix series *Stranger Things* and the popularity of synthwave in music. Vulture columnist Jen Chaney speculates that this nostalgia connects us to the last and therefore unique, pre-internet decade when our attention was dedicated to something other than online chatting and browsing the World Wide Web:

The 80s still matter because, either directly or indirectly, we feel culturally connected to the decade. Sure, the time period offers an escape, either to fond memories of one's youth or to the last full decade before the internet staged a coup on our attention spans. But the seeds of where we are now really were planted back then. . . The 80s has become both nostalgia rabbit hole and cultural mirror. We'll likely be jumping down it and gazing backward into it for a long, long time (Chaney).

Meanwhile, Both Chaney and two authors of the following passage from *Uncovering Stranger Things* maintain that the motive of an escape to the memories of the past tells us more about the present time than about that imaginary time before "everything went wrong," e.g., with national economies, neoliberalism, globalization etc., and when everything presumably could have taken a different direction:

The continuous analepsy of pop culture answers precisely to that fetishism of the past that is re-discovered through other eyes and grants those years a halo of purity and innocence we could never have perceived back then. Pop culture builds upon this idea of nostalgia in the sense that it becomes a great breeding ground for the re-mix of the past with the possibilities of the present (Wetmore 52).

The sound of *Simulation Theory* can be considered as Muse's deliberate contribution to this trend. In an interview with radio Classic 21, when they were asked to

give comments on how “The Void” had been created, Muse shared interesting facts about the background of working on it:

[Classic 21:] The sound of “The Void” is a sort of synthesis of the 70s. I am thinking of bands like Tangerine Dream. This new album echoes the 70s and 80s. The first track [“Algorithm”] sounds like Moroder at the start and like Tangerine Dream at the end. Do you listen to a lot of old electronic music?

[Bellamy:] We had some sci-fi films playing in the studio, so, the imagery would be playing there. The producer Rich Costey—with whom we did five songs, I think—he has a projector, and he would play some B-movies, we hadn’t seen before, from the eighties, like bad sci-fi films. So, we would look as we were making music. And I guess, the natural inclination was to go towards kind of John-Carpenter-type dark horror, early eighties’ horror synth sounds. I like those synth sounds which are ominous, slightly threatening sounding.

[Howard:] The song “The Void” is particularly full of that.⁵⁵

Obviously, we should not neglect the effect of eighties nostalgia on the Muse band-mates who were all teenagers in the 1980s and absorbed the pop culture of the epoch. By the time of *Simulation Theory*’s release, they turned forty and two of them had already had children whom they, like other “Gen-Xers” according to Chaney’s note, could introduce “to the same prized pop-cultural possessions that populated our childhoods: *E.T.* and *Star Wars*, Pac-Man and Rubik’s Cube, *The Goonies* and *Ghostbusters*, Michael Jackson and Cyndi Lauper, *The Princess Bride* and Prince” (Chaney).

Tom Connick, who interviewed Bellamy and Howard in 2018, argues that *Simulation Theory* is the manifestation of Muse’s escapism in all aforementioned senses when he sums up:

Obsessed with the idea of escapism and a throwback to simpler times, Belamy dove headfirst (literally) into VR. From there, he wanted more, and found his next form of escape in the Nevada Desert, where he decamped to last year's Burning Man festival. The escapism became addictive. "What I found in both those things is that people are generally a bit nicer to each other," he says. "People are very pleasant [if] you take away the grind of the news, and in the case of Burning Man, take away law enforcement and stuff like that. It's amazing how pleasant people are to each other in a fantasy world, or a world that's not like this one."

"That's another reason that I became interested in this idea of simulation, and this idea that possibly reality—the reality we're living—maybe isn't..." he pauses, then continues with a nervy laugh. "We might start creating alternate ones that are more fun!"⁵⁶

Probably, all these references to the pop culture of the eighties can explain the specific impression we get while listening to the dramatic transition from the chorus to the bridge in "The Void." Indeed, there is something of the pop-cultural codes of the eighties in the belief that some miracle will save us in the end and that there is (a new) hope. Take *The NeverEnding Story* as an example. After totally failing in the struggle against a mysterious Nothing that devours the fantasy universe Fantasia, the heroes find a way out of despair just by imagining that this is not the end and that the death of Fantasia is just a crisis of fantasy, i.e., the weakness of dreaming. The movie ends with a scene and a musical theme known as "Bastian's Flight," when the main character, a boy called Bastian, rides a flying dragon headlong through both fantasy and real worlds. We even might find some structural similarity between the melodic and rhythmic components of that soundtrack and the bridge in "The Void." Both "Bastian's Flight" and the second half of the bridge are dynamic and bright pieces that follow the depressing and threatening culmination of the main part.

However, the proposed interpretations of Muse's album definitely do not take into account the difference between nostalgia and escapism as personality tendencies and the artistic metaphorization of them. All the stories and facts that Muse have told interviewers as well as the narratives one could compile on the basis of the available data concern the construction of the piece as a public value. That is why the audience is informed about the details and feelings they could identify with and relate to. Meanwhile, as the outcome of a creative process, the piece involves other considerations, motives and strategies about which we are going to talk in what follows.

As we have already mentioned, Muse's performances are a very complex media product that engages sophisticated high-tech props, audio-visual effects and human bodies. As an outcome of the collective action of concept designers, musicians, engineers, choreographers and so on, the overall message of such shows is inevitably questionable and ambiguous. Its meaning is layered and derivative of the superimposition of musical and visual concepts that themselves bear the traces of the implicit conflicting ideologies and intentions of their creators. For instance, it can be difficult to establish who exactly must be credited for the provocative similarity between certain details in the design of the *Simulation Theory* show, such as latex uniforms, masks and high-tech accessories, and the elements of some cyber-fetishistic S&M game. Whether intentionally or not, this symbolism alludes to a masochistic component of the popular protest that Muse constantly thematize, on the one hand, and to a fetishistic underside of the techno-phobia they often talk about on the other. Since we cannot exclude the possibility that the concert set design simply intensifies and overemphasizes the connotations that are already present in the band's texts, we should first focus on their use of language.

Muse's poetic figures are ambivalent. They create tropes, e.g., analogies or metaphors, for which it is difficult to decide which of the meanings is direct and which is not. Bellamy intertwines romantic lyrics with a set of other images and concerns—of tech-

nology, conspiracy, antiestablishment, cosmology—that become the codes for double meanings and polysemy. Here is a brief example from their song “Propaganda” (2018): “Floozy/You got me trapped in your dark fantasy world/Don’t you know you make me woozy?/You have me wrapped around your little finger/Baby, don’t you know you can’t lose/You make me offers that I can’t refuse/You keep telling pretty lies/You toy with the truth/Oh you’re killing me with your/Propaganda.” Does it compare someone’s tactics of seduction with the work of propaganda or, on the contrary, make a bold assumption about the libidinal power of propaganda? We argue that the message can be interpreted in both ways. Rather than Bellamy’s bad or twisted poetic taste, these lines exemplify a deliberate and well-calculated provocation intended to short-circuit obscene and public (political) discourses. When Muse play this song live, several female performers dressed in black latex overalls and armed with huge air blowers fumigate the crowd with clouds of white smoke. This performance looks quite terrifying and seductive at the same time.

What explanation could we give to the unconscious source of the idiomaticity of Bellamy’s poetic language? What could be the ultimate force that causes such metaphoric deformation and conflation of meanings? Perhaps the best psychoanalytically informed answer to the question “What are Muse’s songs about and what connects them to the question of technology?” is *the jouissance of manipulation*. We coin the latter term from the Lacanian *jouissance* and the concept of manipulation reputedly popular among conspiracy theorists. *Jouissance* and *manipulation* are two interdependent notions. *Jouissance* designates an irresistible force that subjects us to pleasure-seeking and is manifested equally by ecstatic enjoyment as by suffering. For instance, this concept explains individual attachments to painful experiences, phobic fantasies and toxic relationships. Muse’s songs feature many aspects of this ambivalent tendency. We find both the elements of guilty pleasure and traumatic experience both in the lyrics and musical component of their every piece, probably

without exception. For example, “Propaganda” offers this mixture of dirty masochistic submissiveness—“I’m the ocean, you’re an oil slick”—and its unbearable mental effect—“Now I’m choking on your thought pollution”—on the level of content. In terms of the form, Muse’s “guilty pleasure” definitely concerns their flirtation with disco rhythms, synthpop sound and luscious melodic lines in combination with brutal metal riffs (“Citizen Erased,” “Resistance,” “Stockholm Syndrome,” “Won’t Stand Down”) in which regard they found their own niche in comparison with predecessors such as Queen or Van Halen, Laibach, Rammstein or Muse contemporaries Evanescence, Diablo Swing Orchestra and other famous performers. Finally, it can be the combination of a light musical form with serious critical or depressing content (“Resistance,” “Drones,” “Compliance”), also practiced by many rock musicians. Further, we will assume that the nostalgic format of the musical concept of “The Void” described in section II enacts this nostalgic sentimentality as a guilty pleasure.

At the same time, we may argue that manipulation is the main recurrent motif that Muse explore in the variety of its manifestations, strategies, techniques and applications. Its presence can be detected in their romantic pieces just as in the songs in which Muse address societal and political issues. The spectrum of its manifestations that they cover includes seduction, psychological pressure, conspiracies, propaganda, brainwashing, and even the classified drug-based methods practiced by secret services.⁵⁷ In what follows, we will maintain that, for Muse, *technology* is a concept and image that condenses into itself the different meanings of manipulation.

Since we may imagine a wide variety of passions that may occur at the intersection of jouissance and manipulation, it is necessary to indicate what is specific to Muse’s representation of it. We might imagine, for instance, a passive jouissance from being manipulated or an active jouissance of the manipulator, such as an abuser, seducer, brainwasher, etc. Alternatively, we could consider it in terms of a fetishistic jouissance that drives one to the figures endowed with power and authority or the jouissance that

hides behind phobias and anxiety.

A diagonal reading/listening of Muse's pieces provides us with abundant information about the attempts they have made to explore each of these four poles. For instance, we understand that, when a lover or the object of passion is called "a supermassive black hole" ("Supermassive Black Hole" from *Black Holes and Revelations*, 2006), this unlikely flattering metaphor concerns an irresistible and all-consuming passion: "Oh, you set my soul alight/Glaciers melting in the dead of night/And a superstar's sucked into the supermassive/Supermassive black hole." The deformation that the lover's image undergoes in this metaphor originates both in the subject's, or "superstar's" as Bellamy ironically refers to himself, thrill of fascination along with resistance to it. Another powerful figure is coined in "Dead Inside" where the addressee is likened to a perfect unfeeling heartless machine to which the protagonist cannot help but surrender: "Revere/A million prayers/And draw me into your holiness/But there's nothing there/Light only shines from those who share/Unleash a million drones/And confine me then erase me babe/Do you have no soul?/It's like it died long ago." This opener track from *Drones* (2015) introduces the leitmotif of the album by mentioning this piece of military technology associated with a new paradigm of warfare, i.e., *Drone Wars*. A swarm of drones sent to confine and destroy a target is an image that connotes indisputable supremacy, efficiency, precision and excludes any idea of negotiation. We might add that, while *the supermassive black hole* implies some playfulness and ironic exaggeration, the object of passion in "Dead Inside" is associated with anguish and emotional devastation. Since both share the features of the object-fetish and the phobic object, on the imaginary axis between these extremes, we would place the former metaphor closer to the pole of the object-fetish and the latter one closer to the middle (see Fig. 4.1).

To better identify the tendency behind the metaphors from "The Void," let us take a brief look at the opposite pole of this imaginary axis (Fig. 4.2). "MK Ultra" (*Re-*



Figure 4.1: Axis "Fetishism-Phobia."

sistance, 2009) aims to imagine from the perspective of a victim the process of brainwashing and gaining mind control: “The wavelength gently grows,/Coercive notions re-evolve,/A universe is trapped inside a tear,/It resonates the core,/Creates unnatural laws,/Replaces love and happiness with fear.” As the musicians explain, the song expresses a concern about the progressing psychological manipulation through media and draws a parallel between it and the classified methods of interrogation practiced by the CIA. Another example of the expression of utter anxiety about manipulation is “Psycho” (*Drones*, 2015) sung from the perspective of a diabolical military service recruiter who promises to make a mindless killer out of you: “Your mind is just a program/And I’m the virus/I’m changing the station/I’ll improve your thresholds/I’ll turn you into a super drone/And you will kill on my command/And I won’t be responsible/I’m gonna make you,/I’m gonna break you/I’m gonna make you, a fucking psycho!/. . . /Your ass belongs to me now!” This time, *drone* is a metaphor for a passive executor, while the active agent is likened to a computer virus, a trojan program. Once again, from the fact that these figures take hold of the poetic imagination, we clearly see that the tension created by the metaphors at issue owes everything to the conflicting individual attitudes towards the disturbing and ambivalent jouissance associated with manipulation.



Figure 4.2: Axis "Fetishism-Phobia," new elements.

Although we can recognize the suggestion of anxiety behind the depressive message of the verses in “The Void” and identify the objection expressed in the chorus

as the indication of a fetishistic denial, the piece as a whole represents a more advanced subjective position that overcomes both of these tensions. If we switch from reading the lyrics to listening to the composition, we cannot avoid the feeling that the accompaniment on the chorus and the instrumental part of the bridge have much more to do with anxiety than the verses. Previously, we mentioned how the popular media interpreted the line “They’re wrong” as a warning or the expression of a threat. However, how should we understand this apparent mismatch between the verbal and musical messages?

We argue that the function of the chorus is crucial for understanding the dominant intonation of the piece. On one hand, the line “They’re wrong” interrupts the current of a narcissistic self-pity or, worse, a melancholic mourning, in which the verses incline to indulge. On the other hand, we see that, instead of ending with the part that begins from “It takes a leap of faith. . . ,” the piece ends on the sequence verse-chorus repeated. This means that the enthusiastic uplift is not the final word. “The Void” does not resolve in an overoptimistic naivety which would feature nothing but a fetishistic disavowal of reality. Instead, the bridge ends on the same chord and tone as the beginning of the chorus, after which the last verse and chorus follow. Thus, the chorus puts a stop to two tendencies that both lead to the madness of giving up to excessive *jouissance*.

Let us see how psychoanalysis explains this subjective impulse to interrupt *jouissance*. First, we need to precisely identify the subject of this symbolic gesture. The signifier *void* could provide us with a clue. We understand that it names the central element of the imaginary scenery of the piece: the nothingness into which our efforts, thoughts and lives are doomed to eventually vanish. The piece invites us to imagine how an endless cosmic or existential abyss yawns before our mind’s eye and establishes a panorama, a background or a stage on which we must try to project our own image. The one who would attempt to do this should most probably feel hypnotized and

absorbed by it, experience a vertigo, a personal dissolution into the dark. Eventually, the never-ending emptiness prevails over any positive image we might throw onto it and makes everything meaningless. However, we should realize that the signifier *void* immobilizes, fixates, cancels the infinite regression, since it names its final destination, however transcendent it may be. Instead of identifying *through* the infinite process of drifting or being sucked into a hole, fading out into a “boundless gloom” and being devoured by the cold, it makes the final state, a void, present right away and provides us with an opportunity to identify *with* it. In other words, this signifier provides an opportunity to identify with or to become the subject of the act that disturbs or alternatively puts the full stop to monotony. The act itself has no substance and can be likened to a cut or a breach that changes the profile of the object in which it occurs. The actual subject in “The Void” is neither the *us* of the verses nor the *you* of the bridge but the one that brings about the rupture in the illusory plenitude of both scenarios.

We may notice that the melodic line of the chorus quite predictably—as the media uses discussed above show—creates an anxious feeling. This is probably the most intriguing element of the composition. On the basis of the lyrics, we may understand why the music in the verses sounds so melancholic and melodramatic or why it is so pathetic and enthusiastic on the bridge. Meanwhile, it can be much more difficult to answer why the chorus that protests against the depressive message of the verses sounds so threatening and moreover why the second chorus is followed by an instrumental bridge with that “ominous” synth line that Muse mentioned in an interview.

Actually, anxiety is the next clue we need to answer our previous question concerning the subjective motivation at issue. In his seminar *Anxiety* (1963-64), Lacan insisted that, contrary to common belief, the emptiness, the nothing, the absence alone cannot trigger anxiety (Lacan and Lacan 67–68; Badiou, *Logics of Worlds* 433).

Anxiety is a warning sign for a subject who comes too close to the abhorrent truth of the “non-castrated jouissance.” To avoid a terminological overcomplication of our argument, let us define it as an enjoyment that lacks nothing, i.e., the jouissance that respects no limit, regulation or prohibition. For instance, many individuals tend to delude themselves by hoping that they can completely fulfill themselves and find harmony—i.e., the complete jouissance—in a certain vocation, lifestyle or identity. However, according to Lacan, this idea of personal plenitude and harmony requires an impossible full identity between the subject and jouissance. This coincidence would presume the complete absence of any symbolic mediation and, therefore, the impossibility to be the subject of such an experience. The accessible forms of losing oneself in jouissance are commonly known as *madness*. Thus, briefly, anxiety protects us from falling into madness.

We can see now that in “The Void” the aforementioned sign of anxiety occurs exactly in the place where the subject must regain itself and dissociate from illusory identities, especially the false plenitude of presence that they suggest. Anxiety marks the zone of parting with the objects subjectively invested with this plenitude, that is, fetishes and objects of phobia. Getting over this zone makes the subject capable of, and often even push towards, producing and obviously appreciating metaphors. This indicates that, for this subject, the mechanism of symbolic substitution prevails over individual fixations on particular objects, images or ideas.

The major poetic effort of “The Void” is dedicated to the creation of the image of liberation from the polar passions. Meanwhile, we must take into account the sublime beauty of the metaphors by which these passions are represented in the piece. Also, once again, the concern for manipulation gives a clue to the motivation behind these poetic figures. We should not neglect the fact that the image, or better, anti-image of the dark freezing abyss, along with other figures of decadence, is the principal element of the narrative ascribed to the antagonistic *them*. Hyperbolae and absolutization,

such as *the boundless gloom*, *the dying sun* and *the mythic giants*, endow this narrative with an exclusive power of persuasion. The antagonist convinces not by means of deception, intimidation or seduction but by means of the sublime aesthetics of our existential tragedy.

The exact and ultimate concern of “The Void” is the power of the sublime and the resistance to it. The verbal message bears no trace of resentment or aggression towards the antagonist or oppressor. We cannot even claim that the threatening connotations of the accompaniment mentioned above have a particular addressee. This is why we should be especially careful with interpreting the bridge as the main message and alternative that Muse oppose to the pessimistic narrative of the imaginary opponent. The message of the bridge is nuanced with a slightly exaggerated enthusiasm and simplicity sufficient to either make the listener suspicious about the pathos of its figures or even find it unbearable. As if to amplify this impression, Bellamy’s vocal on the bridge sounds quite theatrical both in the piano version of the song and even more so in the live version. He so unnaturally over-stresses “a star” in the live version that the word is almost impossible to recognize (*Simulation Theory* Film, 00:54:3-00:54:39). Whether intuitively or deliberately, he resists the very poetic form of the message and suggests looking for its truth somewhere beyond this form.

All these considerations bring us back to the function of the chorus and specifically the final chords of the last one and the piece as such. The musical pattern played by the synthesizer changes. Previously we interpreted this sound as a signal, but sent by and to whom? The human voice, this bearer or medium of the sublime, pronounces the final words of “The Void” and disappears, merged with a passionless repetitive artificial automated tone. Does this imply that simulation—represented here by the electronic sound—has the last word in the imaginary argument of the piece, i.e., that the world, life and, importantly, our entire experience of reality are virtual, artificially generated and programmed? Does the idea of simulation render

our passions, however sublime they may appear to us, epiphenomenal, superficial and non-genuine? It seems that “The Void” stops at the exact point where these questions can be posed but does not propose any conclusive answer. It stops at the point where we cannot identify ourselves with the sublime world-weariness any longer and face the challenge of passing through the singularity where the human and the artificial, the real and the virtual converge. Void might designate the link between these infinitely converging realms.

Resistance

Muse’s lyrics often feature what we might consider post-9/11 technological dystopianism and political protest. Historically, precisely since the 1970s to 1990s period, the combination of techno-dystopian and protest views has been relatively more common to the legacy of progressive/industrial rock and industrial metal than to other styles of heavy metal and punk music. Techno-dystopic motifs can be found in the lyrics of industrial rockers such as Throbbing Gristle, Cabaret Voltaire, Killing Joke, Nine Inch Nails, Rob Zombie, White Zombie, Marilyn Manson, Fear Factory, Gravity Kills, or Sister Machine Gun. Since the beginning of the new century, the focus of political protest in rock songs has shifted or extended towards the topics of total surveillance, new forms of automated control and censorship, fake realities manufactured by media and so on. KMFDM is one of the most prominent collectives who, especially since the 1990s, have problematized gun control, terrorism, the weaponization of technologies and the massive pro-war propaganda in the US. In many aspects, Muse’s oppositional and critical attitude towards the post-9/11 policies remains resonant with these veterans of alternative and industrial rock. They also adopt many elements of Rage Against the Machine’s (R.A.M.) pro-revolt, anti-brainwashing, antiestablishment and antiglobalist agenda. The comparison of “Take the Power Back” by R.A.M. and “Up-

rising” by Muse shows significant parallels in their rhetoric. In 1992, R.A.M. sang: “Bam! Here’s the plan/Motherfuck Uncle Sam/Step back, I know who I am/Raise up your ear, I’ll drop the style and clear/It’s the beats and the lyrics they fear/The rage is relentless/We need a movement with a quickness/You are the witness of change/And to counteract/We gotta take the power back” (“Take the Power Back”). Here is the Muse of 2009 in the atmosphere of the recent financial crisis: “Rise up and take the power back/It’s time the fat cats had a heart attack/You know that their time’s coming to an end/We have to unify and watch our flag ascend” (“Uprising”). Muse’s political lyrics can be aggressive but, in contrast to other bands of the industrial and alternative wave such as Nine Inch Nails, Marilyn Manson or Rammstein, they are never totally brutal or obscenely perverse.

Bellamy’s lyrics have another curious feature: except for the fictional “United States of Eurasia (+ Collateral Damage)” from *Resistance* and Zetas in “Exo-Politics,” Muse’s songs normally contain neither proper names nor real geographic or historic references. For instance, it is difficult to imagine that Bellamy would mention Uncle Sam or Eurocentrism like R.A.M. do in the cited song. His poetic language of protest remains conceptually transparent as though Muse were trying to create universally accessible messages. This, of course, speaks a lot to Bellamy’s idealism well traceable in the simple figures and sentence structures of “The Void.” Meanwhile, “United States of Eurasia” reflects the inherent controversy of this cosmopolitan attitude. While the lyrics wonders: “Why split these states/When there can be only one?” and eventually assures us that “soon we will see/There can be only one! United States of Eurasia,” the piece ends with the sounds of jet fighters and bomb explosions. In our opinion, this desire to find a sublime form in which the controversy of the personal perspective regarding global political dilemmas could be poetically preserved is the important component of Muse’s individuality.

The implicit political message of “The Void” can be understood only in the context

of the Muse rhetoric's perpetual shuttling between moments of activist enthusiasm and critical reflection. Precisely, this piece incorporates the moment of reflection and its apparently politically neutral lyrics should be read with consideration of the opposite pole.

Muse's techno-dystopianism is tragic rather than cynical. It bears some similarity to Radiohead (of the period starting with *OK Computer*, 1997) with their introspective focus on personal alienation and the anxieties associated with information technologies as well as environmental issues. However, Muse are more romantic and significantly less introverted, melancholic and depressive than Radiohead. The Muse lyrics portray the life and love of an ordinary person in a dehumanized technocratic world with which this individual is in constant inner conflict. If we set aside all fantastic elements in the fictional alternative-history worlds of *V for Vendetta* (2005), *Watchmen* (2009), *Black Mirror* (2011-19) and probably *Counterpart* (2017-19), we would be left with an inherently broken society similar to the one where Bellamy usually situates his protagonists. The type of technocratic dystopianism reflected by Muse is prominently Orwellian and often Kafkaesque. Muse's *Resistance*, where the references to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are most evident, belongs on the long list of albums and performers influenced by the novel including Spirit, Hugh Hopper, David Bowie, The Jam, Rick Wakeman, The Alan Parsons Project, Ed Starink, Subhumans, Eurythmics, Queensryche, Rage Against the Machine, Bad Religion, Bobby Previte, Radiohead, Anthony Phillips, Susumu Hirasawa, Bumblefoot. Beside Orwell's novel, many features of such a dystopia can be found in Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) and from a different perspective Palahniuk/Fincher's *Fight Club* (1996/1999). In the light of Muse's interest in conspiracy theories, it is worth mentioning the portrayal of the consumer society secretly ruled by aliens in Carpenter's *They Live* (1988). Similar views of the alien and oppressive nature of the technologies massively promoted in the late capitalist epoch subsequently informed the plot of *The Arrival* (1996) as well

as the TV series *The X Files* (1993-2018) and *First Wave* (1998-2001).

In the first place, the resistance to the rise of technology that Bellamy mentions in the interview with Classic 21 means a resistance to the people in power with whom he has primarily associated the technologies, such as robots, AI, drones, spyware, military satellites and so on. Therefore, embracing technology must presume a way to dissociate it from the odious image of oppressors and wrest control over technology from them. While in most of Muse's protest songs, the antagonistic figure of the oppressor is an aggregate image that refers to human agents and agency, this reference is barely identifiable behind the imagery on *Simulation Theory* such as algorithms, simulations, the coder and the mainframe. Here the major enemies are impersonal and immaterial, such as propaganda ("Propaganda," "Break It To Me," "Blockades"), false beliefs ("Thought Contagion"), delusions ("The Void") and self-imposed obstacles ("The Dark Side"). To show this change of perspective, let us reproduce a part of the screenplay written by Bellamy for the *Simulation Theory* film (2020). The following monologue is held in the credit sequence by a TV newscaster who looks quite confused by a sudden realization that pushes him to speak his mind right in the middle of a news report:

This might be the beginning or the end of things. I'm not sure. I kind of feel like I don't even know what the truth is any more. Do you? I do know that we have been lied to and manipulated for too long. Far, far too long. I'm sick and tired of it, goddamn it. We hide in our homes, scrolling through feeds of other people's fantasy made-up lives, while the algorithms give us bite-size information tailored to what corporations, lying politicians and foreign powers want us to see and believe. We've blindly clicked 'Accept' to their terms and conditions too many times. And now we are owned. We have been reduced to nothing more than data to be bought and sold to the highest bidder, so they can sell us more crap we

don't need, make us angry at things we never cared about. We've turned into consumption machines, destroying each other and the only planet we have. Whatever happened to human dignity and privacy? We thought we had escaped into our own quiet little world. But no. No, they had to invade our minds. They wanna control and manipulate the entire reality. But I have to wonder, who are "they"? Is there even a "they" any more? Maybe the algorithms and AI have become the new "they", and maybe they now control us and manipulate us. Well, they know us better than we know ourselves. We have to wake up. It's time to wake up! Wake up, people! Wake up! Don't just sit there watching! Do something! This is our last chance to take back control before it's too late (*Simulation Theory* 01:26:26-01:28:35).

Obviously, behind the man's particular perplexity concerning the identity of the suspect secret puppeteers that brainwash us, we should recognize Bellamy's clear understanding of how the complexity of the social-political situation created and maintained with the mediation of algorithms and AI reveals the deficiency of populist and conspiracy-theorist narratives and specifically the dichotomy *us vs them*. Algorithms implemented in GPS navigators, virtual assistants, search engines, text autocorrection and grammar apps for example tell us what to do, in fact issue commands that we have to follow to get what we need. This is literally a dictate of, and by means of, machines that we should distinguish from manipulation by lies or propaganda. That these machines imitate human intelligence, i.e., our own internal mental and neural processes such as memory, computation, inference making etc., and also the "knowledge" about us they accrue through our interactions with them, endows their recommendations and predictions with the exclusive power of persuasion. There is no human "them" behind these computations. The "classical" oppressors, i.e., stock markets, corporations, governments, financial institutions, oligarchs, and secret ser-

vices rely on digital data analytics to a greater degree than individual consumers and ordinary citizens. That is why in the pieces from *Simulation Theory* we encounter mixed attitudes concerning the resistance to the oppression and the oppressors, such as:

1. Calls for a revolt: “Reload/Crash out/This means war with your creator” (“Algorithm”), “Life is a broken simulation I’m unable to feel/I’m searching for something that’s real/I am always seeking to see what’s behind the veil/Trapped in a maze of unseen walls/These blockades must fall/Crush, crush/Raze and rush/Seize and fight for your life/Smash, test/Beat the best/Fight for your life/You’ve been summoned now” (“Blockades”);
2. Defeatism: “Strung out, falling from the big time/Welcome to the infinite black skies/It’s too late for a revolution/Brace for the final solution” (“Thought Contagion”), and an urge to break free: “Break me out, ... let me flee/Break me out, ... set me free” (“The Dark Side”);
3. Open confrontation with an oppressor: “Get out of my face, out of my mind/I see your corruption, I’m not blind/I’ll carry the burden and take the strain/And when I am done I will make you pay” (“Pressure”);
4. Rejection of patronizing attitude: “I can handle the truth/I can cope with whatever you’re holding back/No need to sugar coat/Just,/(Break it to me) .../I know how to mend/I can rise high above the ashes/I’ll re-invent/I will re-emerge/Reborn” (“Break It To Me”);
5. Encouragement to fight against the system and the dystopic mindset it induces: “Let’s face all our fears/Come out of the shade/Let’s burn all the money/Absolve all the lies/And wake up unscathed” (“Something Human”), “I see a change on the horizon/Reasons to be frightened/There’s nothing we can’t get through/I

am here to tell you/To get up and fight” (“Get Up And Fight”), “Dig down, find faith/We won’t let them divide,/We will never abide/We will find a way” (“Dig Down”), “It takes a leap of faith/To awake from these delusions/You are the coder/And avatar/A star” (“The Void”).

Simulation becomes a concept and figure that helps Muse to suspend, at least partially, the narratives and oppositions they had reproduced in their lyrics previously and attempt an alternative. To defeat the superior oppressor-creator now means to confront the code that generates the appearances.

The *Simulation Theory* film provides a very direct clue to one particular understanding of “The Void,” so let us take a closer look at the context in which it is set.

The film depicts a fantasy dystopian world of simulations. In this world created and hosted by what the film refers to as “the mainframe,” what we consider our world or reality is just one of the simulations, although nobody realizes this until some anomaly zone occurs in one of London’s districts and some unknown virus begins to infect people. The anomaly distorts perceptual reality by making other realities-simulations sporadically interfere with it. The authorities attempt to restrict access to the place of the anomaly’s outburst. News outlets provide regular updates about the virus’s spread. A group of scientists assigned to study the anomaly encounter a mysterious visitor who appears from nowhere and calls herself “NPC” (non-player character). The visitor announces that, to correct this “error,” i.e., stop the infection, the mainframe creates a “truth slayer” that must “erase, reset and format” our broken simulation.

One of the most striking scenes in the film occurs when the mysterious visitor demonstrates to the scientists that reality is thoroughly controlled or programmed from without. They are in a laboratory. The TV is showing news. The NPC is comfortably sitting in a chair in the middle of the room. A newscaster says: “Here at

V1, we wanted to take a moment to say we appreciate your loyalty and viewership.” The NPC pronounces: “Your daily engagement and consumption...” and the TV suddenly switches to another program, and a reporter there says the same words: “Your daily engagement and consumption...” One of the scientists exclaims: “What?! What are you doing in there?!” The visitor continues: “. . . as your source for truth.” The program changes again, and a woman reporter goes: “. . . as your source for truth.” The NPC and the TV voice together: “It is our greatest responsibility to serve quality and balanced journalism.” The scientist: “They’ve taken control...” The voices from alternating channels pronounce in unison with the visitor: “False news, like today’s outbreak, makes its way into headlines. Our commitment to factual reporting is the foundation of our credibility. Now more than ever, we cannot stress enough how important it is for our viewers to know there is no virus and there is nothing to fear.” As this scene develops towards its culmination, we can hear the first chords of “The Void” in the background. Immediately after the talking heads one by one repeat “and there is nothing to fear,” we hear the first line of the song: “They’ll say, no one can see us...” (*Simulation Theory* 00:50:39-00:51:25).

It is possible to conclude that the virus at issue is truth itself, i.e., both as a concept and as the truth that accidentally reveals about the nature of the world. The virus makes people seek beyond appearances and see what they had not been meant to see. The central narrative maintained on behalf of the almighty mainframe associates humans with a tear in the fabric of appearances or simulation and identifies them as a virus that must be eliminated while the consistency of the simulation is to be restored. Thus, simulation theory becomes a means to articulate the reason for the existence of propaganda, brainwashing and other techniques and technologies of psychological manipulation: wiping out the uniquely human sensitivity and bias to truth. In this regard, we might recall the main line of Baudrillard’s *The Perfect Crime* (1996) that a perfect simulation is the one about which no one should ever discover or suspect

that it is a simulation (Baudrillard).

In the context of this film, the main message of “The Void” is surprisingly quite Badiouian: truths are possible and their eventual realization awakens some people from their delusions. Badiou’s concept of truths can help us to distinguish between the being and existence of truths: their being is generic (Badiou, *Being and Event* 356–358) while existence is exceptional (*Logics of Worlds* 4). The truth of a simulation as a world of appearances cannot be eliminated, although it is not necessarily known or explicit. It is not derivative of the appearances as some ultimate *what* of the empirical and known reality, although it can be traced by the real consequences of the assumption, “a leap of faith,” that some alternative order of things can be true. Thus, “The Void” shares with Badiou’s philosophy this belief in the possibility of an event against the dominant ideology whose main function, according to Žizek, is to kill hope.⁵⁸

These considerations allow us to finally suggest a possible interpretation of *the coder, the avatar* and *a star*, the three figures that appear in “The Void.” In order to make this interpretation consistent with the line of argumentation begun in section VI, we shall try to preserve the ambiguity with which one has to deal while deciding between more vulgar and finer meanings. For example, there are two directions in which one might interpret the word *coder* in the context provided by this song. Its direct domain is obviously computer coding, e.g., in network administration, software development and web design. Taken in a more metaphoric sense, *the coder* may mean someone who secretly controls or makes the rules of some system’s or agents’ behavior. To provide a fictional example consistent with the framework of the simulation hypothesis, we might recall the Architect from the cyber-dystopia *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), the superior AI that designed that simulation. Noteworthy is the fact that in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) this character was replaced with a more advanced alternative, a psychotherapist. He creates a version of the Matrix that embeds the

factor of uncertainty and unsustainability as well as is invulnerable to the critique, doubts or the possibility of disclosure. In the *Simulation Theory* film, the supreme coder is a mysterious mainframe. In addition, the vocabulary of coding and programming is massively exploited in popular literature on personal development and success, the earliest examples of which are perhaps Dianetics (introduced in 1952) and Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP, introduced in 1970s). Obviously, we could align our interpretation of the line “you are the coder” with this popular understanding and paraphrase it as “you are the designer of your own life and reality.” However, another vector of interpretation seems to us more promising.

The coder is a figure that refers to a power not just to improve someone’s personal life but to change the lives of huge masses of people. We know that the coder’s work is pivotal for contemporary computational capitalism. A piece of code, e.g, an algorithm, a piece of software, etc., written by one or a few IT specialists in a few hours or days, can help billions of people to earn money by using it at work and can even bring huge fortunes to some of them. The low costs of writing code for an internet banking service, a search algorithm like Google Search or an online payment system like PayPal are incomparable with the multi-billion dollar incomes of the digital giants that privatized these developments. A piece of software can be as beneficial as it can be detrimental in terms of organizing masses of people, individual time, labor, money etc. We assume that insofar as, in its portrayal of everyone’s and everything’s destiny, “The Void” lays such a strong stress on *us*, the solution it proposes must also concern this community. Whether we are to remain estranged or not, whether we are to be pulled “out of the boundless gloom” and “slay giants” or not is a question of the inventor’s drive within us. Probably, Bellamy’s reported intention to “embrace technology” finds a particular manifestation in this exact figure. Though, once again, the word *coder* remains open for interpretation when it comes to the social or personal vector of the coder’s work, i.e., whether the matter is reinventing

our collective destiny or reframing the subjective perception of reality.

We may understand the appearance of the word *avatar* in this context accordingly. If there is a figure for the one who is behind the screen or interface, i.e., the coder, then there must be another that represents you for others, that is, the avatar. By *avatars*, most internet users understand the graphical representations that accompany our nicknames as they appear in the social media profiles or online games. It could be that “The Void” even restores some spiritual connotations of the word, which in Hinduism means the material incarnation of a god, except that in the context of the song the coder is to take the place of the deity. It could be a hint at some contemporary western adaptations of Buddhism and Krishnaism currently popular among the British and North American middle classes and social media influencers. In this case, the idea of awakening from delusions, which is the central motto of Buddhism, would find an alternative source. However, this line of interpretation has no factual support. None of Muse’s members has indicated any specific interest in eastern spirituality or any kind of esotericism. “The Void” does not go beyond most common concepts of *avatar*, although we cannot exclude Bellamy’s wish to make it resonate with those popular topics too.

Finally, due to its polysemanticity, *a star* is the most ambiguous figure. It can refer to the common understanding of the metaphor *star*, i.e., as a media persona, or alternatively to a more romantic *the lodestar of someone’s life*, and, maybe, to something even more personal or idiomatic. We may assume that Muse intentionally preserve the interplay between these interpretations too. Furthermore, *a star* does not fit well into the sequence begun by *the coder* and *avatar*. While the latter belong to the world of computers, video games and online communication, the former takes us to a completely different realm. However, it also can symbolize the unity of definitive action thinkable in “the coder” and self-realization presumed in “the avatar.” Real stars are the objects that give without taking, as it were. They are the sources of

light and warmth. They serve travelers in the night for orientation. They are seen for they shine. They make visible everything their light can reach. In this sense, being a star can no longer be associated with vegetating in obscurity as portrayed in the verses.

Music, the Origin of Symmetry

We would like to preface our concluding words by citing Bellamy's commentary from one of the early interviews with Muse dated 2001:

I was reading *The Elegant Universe* and *Hyper Space* which contains theories about what the Universe is, and it has different perspectives on it... It had a lot of mathematical concepts in it and I'm not very good with that, but I was trying to grasp them, and the book explained that the next big question is "what is the origin of symmetry?" I related this to what I had on a computer screen that had the wave form of the music on screen, and I became interested in the fact that music is completely random vibrations in the air, but we make sense of what is chaotic and make it in to something beautiful. Music has always been an escape for me, and when I play music it is like I don't exist and everything becomes very simple and to me that is the only thing that actually is me. Music is my origin of symmetry and it is rationalising all the chaos.⁵⁹

Our inquiry into the multiple storylines that both have been and can be created around "The Void" and *Simulation Theory* probably sheds some light on the meaning of this phrase "Music is my origin of symmetry." "The Void" is a fantasy that combines contemplation of the bitter truth of our most probable future scenario with a desperate hope for a breakthrough towards a bigger and greater truth. It is also a document of a musician's psycho-biography and a band's history that we now can conceive of in the

broader context of the societal repercussions of the so-called *digital disruption* such as the growing anxieties about unemployment caused by robotization, AI-equipped weaponry and the developing means of mass manipulation etc. Our conclusion is quite congruent with the generalizations drawn by Frith concerning the social and cultural function of pop music:

For the best part of this [twentieth] century, pop music has been an important way in which we have learned to understand ourselves as historical, ethnic, class-bound, gendered, national subjects. This has had conservative effects (primarily through nostalgia) as well as liberating ones. What music does (all music) is put into play a sense of identity that may or may not fit the way we are placed by other social forces. Music certainly puts us in our place, but it can also suggest that our social circumstances are not immutable (and that other people—performers, fans—share our dissatisfaction). Music is not in itself revolutionary or reactionary. It is a source of strong feelings which, because they are also socially coded, can come up against common sense (Frith 276–277).

We have shown that the informal motto of Muse’s *Simulation Theory* program, “embrace technology,” had at least three main realizations: 1) in the fictional concept of simulation as a means of the creation of new realities, 2) in the band’s experimentation with combining “the organic and synthetic” in the sound of the album, and 3) in “re-humanization” of live performances. It has become a snapshot of the pop-culture and the info-sphere of the end of the second decade of the current century, overwhelmed with the pessimistic scenarios and conflicting narratives concerning the ongoing crisis and the ways out of it. Its vocabulary and the overall repertoire of the means of expression is a quaint amalgam of subcultural codes which reflects the preoccupations of its time: cyberpunk, conspiracies, antiestablishment sentiment, systems theory, thermodynamics, cosmology and so on. “The Void” is an attempt to “make

something beautiful” out of the confusing personal tensions and reactions on both the individual and global course of life.

Notes

1. In *Encore*, Lacan puns about the couple of signifiers, S_1 and S_2 , by which he has articulated the signifier-to-signifier relation in his late theory (Lacan, *Seminar XX* 181-182). The pun consists in reading them as “Is it one or is it two?” which in French—“Est ce un ou est ce deux?”—is homophonous of “ S_1 or S_2 .”
2. Baudrillard develops this topic in *The System of Objects* (1968). In his later works—most prominently in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976)—he opposes the functional object as a technocratic simulacrum to the symbolic values of traditional, pre-modern societies. In particular, he argues that the contemporary simulacra embody binary logic as opposed to inherently ambivalent symbolic values of traditional cultures.
3. Cantor’s continuum hypothesis and the set-theoretic axiom of choice.
4. The generic filter (Cohen 1144).
5. This thesis ensues from Cohen’s proof of the independence of the continuum hypothesis and the axiom of choice from other set-theoretic axioms.
6. He uses this notion since *Saint Paul: the Foundation of Universalism* (1997) where it appears as *nominal covers*. To make the translation more coherent with Badiou’s terminology employed in our discussion, we replace the translator’s, that is, Ray Brassier’s, *occlusion* with the set-theoretical equivalent of the French *recouvrement*, i.e., *cover*, which otherwise certainly reads less natural than the translator’s choice. The passage can be found on pages 12-13 of the 1997 PUF French edition. Badiou extensively analyses cover as the means of the imposition of finitude in *The Immanence of Truths* (Badiou, *L’immanence Des Vérités* 75-275).
7. See Lacan’s Seminar XVII *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*.

8. See the OpenAI's GPT-3 website <https://openai.com/blog/openai-api/> and the report "Language Models are Few-Shot Learners" <https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.14165> for reference.
9. See "Searching for a Mate: The Rise of the Internet as a Social Intermediary" by Michael J. Rosenfeld and Reuben J. Thomas <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0003122412448050>.
10. "Disintermediating your friends: How online dating in the United States displaces other ways of meeting" by the same authors, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1908630116>.
11. Lury et al. provide a broad discussion of the applicability of the intrinsic and extrinsic topology to culture (Lury, Parisi, and Terranova)
12. This intuitive explanation implicitly refers to a procedure by which mathematicians define the topological invariant such as fundamental group of a knot. Thus, mathematically, a link is a sensu-stricto signifier.
13. Fink reminds us that in order to avoid psychosis a child must make a neurotic choice (choose the neurotic symptom) (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 46, 49-50). Another "choice" can be perversion (12-13).
14. See Louise Amoore's discussion of the relationships between digital technologies and mobile bodies in *The Politics of Possibility*, Duke University Press Books, 2013.
15. As it should become clear from the further explanation, its translation as *misconception* provides a better connection to the context of trauma than *misunderstanding* preferred by translators and suggested by dictionaries.
16. Freud insisted that hearing the groaning that comes from the parents' bedroom during their coitus leaves a permanent trace in the child's memory and completes the ensemble of the primary scene as a source of the primordial trauma.
17. Except for this aspect, we cannot follow the rest part of his argument. When it comes to coupling the types of mediation with mythological figures, intellectual traditions and disciplines of thinking, Galloway's approach is palpably inspired by a Heideggerian-Kittlerian reading of the history of western metaphysics. As it can become clear for the reader familiar with Galloway's text, the conclusions that we draw from the similar premises do not imply with necessity the categorization

proposed by him.

18. This term is produced from *hermeneutics* and *Hermes* by analogy with *iridescent* as derivative of *Iris*.
19. Badiou, for instance, not only fully supports this identification but also applies it to himself and to anyone whose ambition is to be a true philosopher. See his *The True Life*, for reference.
20. It is well known that Freud's initiative towards a scientific foundation for psychoanalysis was inspired by the case of Anna O., a hysterical patient. Lacan considers the role of such personalities as pivotal for every significant turn in the history of science. For instance, Socrates' ceaseless questioning inspired the classical Greek philosophic rationality.
21. Our version is derivative from Plato's theory of knowledge as reminiscence and corresponding opposition between *anamnesis* and *hypomnesis*, i.e., natural and artificial memory. Along with Husserl's phenomenology, this opposition also became a source of Stiegler's distinction of *secondary* and *tertiary retentions*.
22. A focused discussion of this semiotic operation follows below.
23. We spare on the details concerning the importance of individual bedrooms for the sexuation of pre-adults, which was pointed out by Foucault in the first two volumes of his *History of Sexuality*.
24. Sidenotes that inform the community about a routine necessity to go offline and visit a washroom or complains about hardships caused by long sitting are common in the communities of the internet live chats or the online multiplayer games.
25. Galloway explains that *hypercommunication* stands for "an ecstasy of immediacy" (Galloway, Thacker, and Wark 30). It is a paradoxical side effect of communication that becomes too direct and unidirectional. When mediation becomes excessively transparent and the medium, in a sense, merges with the sender, i.e., begins to replace the other, this immediacy overwhelms the receiver.
26. Lacan's formalization for it, on which we cannot elaborate here, is read: *the subject underneath the object-a, in the place of the product*, in the discourse of university:

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

27. According to Lacan, this is the meaning of Descartes' revolution in modern scientific thinking: first, Descartes renounces any ambition concerning the eternal truths (the constants and divine ideas that are conventionally written with capital letters; and therefore, signs, in Lacan's presentation in *Seminar XI*) and decides to content himself with only logically clear finite ideas (represented by little algebraic letters, variables, signifiers, combined and studied on the basis of logical rules); second, he displaces the meaning of truth from *knowledge* to *the method*, i.e., a procedure that makes cognition infinite.
28. It would be premature to call it *subject*. When we abstract alienation in the structure of the trauma, we are yet on a virtual stage where one is literally spoken by the Other.
29. See "MuseWiki: The Void." *The Void (Song) – MuseWiki: Supermassive Wiki for the Band Muse*, [https://musewiki.org/The_Void_\(song\)](https://musewiki.org/The_Void_(song)). Accessed 20 Apr. 2022.
30. See Varga, George. "Muse May Have Made Its Last Album, Says Drummer." *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 6 Jan. 2016,
<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/entertainment/music/sdut-muse-drummer-dominic-howard-interview-2016jan06-htmstory.html>.
31. On some phrases, on which more later, Bellamy's voice is processed through a plugin that renders a chord from one tone. When performed live, Muse's bassist Chris Wolstenholme vocally accompanies Bellamy in these parts.
32. See KROQ. *Matt Bellamy and Dominic Howard Say "Black Mirror" Influenced New Muse Album*. 2018. *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/q1o50lIOFAU?t=227>.
33. The term *space dementia* refers to a hypothetical disorder that should most probably affect an astronaut who happened to be lost and left to die in open space.
34. See *Interviews Classic 21: A l'occasion de leur nouvel album "Simulation Theory" sur Auvio*. www.rtf.be, https://www.rtf.be/auvio/detail_interview-de-muse-matt-bellamy-et-dominic-howard?id=2419638. Accessed 15 Mar. 2022.
35. See *MUSE - How Did "The Void" Come Together? [Simulation Theory Behind-The-Scenes]*. 2019. *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zQjgRc2Y58>.

36. To king David and his brave generals who killed Goliath and other giants while conquering Palestine.
37. *Interviews Classic 21*.
38. Philip, Tom. "Muse Found Solace in Escaping Reality on Their New Record." *GQ*, 19 Dec. 2018, <https://www.gq.com/story/muse-found-solace-in-escaping-reality-on-their-new-record>.
39. See Connick, Tom. "The Big Read – Muse: Together in Electric Dreams." *NME*, 16 Nov. 2018, <https://www.nme.com/big-reads/big-read-muse-together-electric-dreams-2403130>.
40. In the phenomenological sense of it, which basically presumes a crucial for understanding creative and constructive function of consciousness with regard to its objects.
41. "The Big Read – Muse: Together in Electric Dreams."
42. Ibid.
43. See *NME Meets Muse: Weird Noises, 'Stranger Things' and the 'Simulation Theory' Tour*. 2018. *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trzr3Hb1idU>.
44. The extended list of books related to Muse is compiled by MuseWiki at <https://musewiki.org/Books>.
45. See Radio X. *A Conversation with Muse | FULL Interview | Radio X*. 2018. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrVV-GU_rTI.
46. Ibid.
47. In many aspects, Bellamy's understanding resembles Baudrillard's concept and most probably was informed by it indirectly, that is by the mediation of the more recent and accessible literature.
48. See Vector09. *Muse - Pressure (Sukkiri) bilibili*. <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV11t41117ez/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2022.
49. The website of Burning Man provides the following information: "Guided by the values expressed by the 10 Principles, Burning Man is a global ecosystem of artists, makers, and community organizers who co-create art, events, and local initiatives around the world. Most recognizably, tens of thousands of Burners gather annually to build Black Rock City, a participative temporary metropolis in the Nevada desert. The nonprofit Burning Man Project produces the annual Burning Man event in

Black Rock City, and provides year-round support, connection, education, and grants to an ever-growing network of Regional Burning Man communities in more than 40 US states and 35 countries” (<https://burningman.org/about/>). / “Burning Man Project’s mission is to produce the annual event known as Burning Man and to guide, nurture and protect the more permanent community created by its culture. Our intention is to generate society that connects each individual to his or her creative powers, to participation in community, to the larger realm of civic life, and to the even greater world of nature that exists beyond society” (<https://burningman.org/about/our-mission/>).

50. See: <https://twitter.com/MuseSide/status/1060834549326901254>,
<https://twitter.com/Juliortz/status/1062029225413300224>.
51. In 1976, Sitchin claimed that he found Sumerian myths telling about the humankind’s ancestry from a trans-Neptunian planet Nibiru. According to Sitchin, an extraterrestrial race from that planet gave origins to the ancient Sumerian and Babylonian civilizations. After a series of collisions with other stellar objects, Nibiru itself allegedly broke into numerous parts, one of which became Earth.
52. Philip, Tom. “Muse Found Solace in Escaping Reality on Their New Record.”
53. “Zetas” refers to one of the most famous ufologist conspiracy theories according to which a powerful alien civilization from Zeta Reticuli secretly rules the Earth.
54. See for instance *The Great Reset* by the WEF founder Klaus Schwab.
55. *Interviews Classic 21*.
56. “The Big Read – Muse: Together in Electric Dreams.”
57. See the song “MK Ultra” from *Resistance* (2009) for reference.
58. Majid Abed. *Slavoj Žižek: The Function of Ideology Today Is to Kill Hope*. 2021. YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkPNgw2VUbU>.
59. *Steve Lamacq (Radio) – MuseWiki: Supermassive Wiki for the Band Muse*. [https://www.musewiki.org/Steve_Lamacq_\(Radio\)](https://www.musewiki.org/Steve_Lamacq_(Radio)). Accessed 21 Apr. 2022.

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