

UVM ScholarWorks

The Sublime Object of Digitality: Psychoanalysis and Cyberspace

Item Type	thesis;article
Authors	Kennison, Grady
Download date	2026-05-10 11:11:21
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14849/3493

THE SUBLIME OBJECT OF DIGITALITY: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND
CYBERSPACE

A Thesis Presented

by

Grady Kennison

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

May, 2022

Defense Date: March 30, 2022
Thesis Examination Committee:

Todd McGowan, Ph. D, Advisor
John Waldron, Ph. D, Chairperson
Jean Bessette, Ph.D.
Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

ABSTRACT

Psychoanalysis, from Freud to Lacan and beyond, offers a unique toolkit for theorizing and understanding the visible and invisible effects of our collective digitization. In this project, I will work through central concepts of psychoanalytic theory – including Lacan’s three orders, the *objet a*, and more – while both rethinking our understanding of cyberspace via psychoanalysis and rethinking our understanding of psychoanalysis via cyberspace. Our subjectivity and our public discourse are today irrevocably intertwined with digital technology and cyberspace; psychoanalysis, as a theory centered on subjectivity and discourse, is an indispensable framework for reckoning with our plugged-in lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dana and Jennifer Kennison, who have believed in me for three decades and don't seem likely to stop soon.

Curtis Browne and Cade Olmstead, theoretical allies and dear friends, who are always willing to assure me that I'm not totally losing it.

Todd McGowan, who taught me to tarry with the negative.

Erin McConnell, for everything.

And in the memory of Professor R. Thomas Simone, who would disagree with every word you're about to read, though without whom these words would not exist to be read at all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1

 1.1. Cyberspace on the Couch; Psychoanalysis Online 1

CHAPTER 2: THE THREE ORDERS AND THE CYBERSPACE *a* 5

 2.1. Imaginary, Symbolic, Real 5

 2.2. The Imaginary 6

 2.2.1. The Ego 6

 2.2.2. Simulation and the GUI 8

 2.2.3. The Dominant Imaginary 10

 2.2.4. All I see is blonde, brunette, redhead 13

 2.3. The Symbolic 15

 2.3.1. Beyond Interface Value 15

 2.3.2. Cyberspace is Structured like a Language 17

 2.3.3. Copjec Contra Chun 18

 2.4. The Real 21

 2.4.1. Uncomputable 21

 2.4.2. Objectified Impossibility 24

 2.4.3. Lacan’s Gaze 25

 2.4.4. The Real, Occluded 28

CHAPTER 3: THE CYBERSPACE SUBJECT 32

 3.1. Desire, Fantasy, Anxiety 32

 3.2. Desire 34

3.2.1. The Object–Cause of Desire	34
3.2.2. The Digital Big Other	36
3.2.3. Designed Desire	38
3.3. Fantasy	40
3.3.1. The Formula of Fantasy	40
3.3.2. The Non–Relation	42
3.3.3. From Conjunctive to Connective	47
3.4. Anxiety	48
3.4.1. Removing the Space Between	48
3.4.2. A Detour Through Heidegger	51
3.4.3. Anxiety is Not Without an Object	52
3.4.4. Life in the <i>Unheimlich</i> Valley.....	56
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION	58
4.1. Beyond the Pleasure Principle	58
4.1.1. Everything, All of the Time	58
4.1.2. From Boredom to Dancing	60
4.1.3. Is Bartleby Online?	62
WORKS CITED	67

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Cyberspace on the Couch; Psychoanalysis Online

Freud could not have anticipated the internet. And, though it is true that many theorists and thinkers have written on or about psychoanalysis's relationship to digital technology, it is decidedly a minority field when compared to the rest of digital humanities scholarship and theory. The omnipresence of cameras and digital surveillance makes Foucauldian, panoptic analysis very popular; the work of Deleuze and Guattari emphasizes the rhizomatic network and points toward transhumanism. In other words, psychoanalysis is out of fashion in cyberspace. Contra this, I believe it is only via psychoanalysis that some fundamental features of our relationship to cyberspace can be uncovered and understood. Simultaneously and inversely, I believe it is only by understanding our relationship to cyberspace that psychoanalysis can find relevance in the digital moment. This two-pronged argument – that psychoanalysis and cyberspace must wash each other's hands, as it were – will unfold across the subsequent chapters.

Psychoanalysis has been attuned to the effects and impacts of technology on the human psyche and civilization almost since its inception. What insights psychoanalysis can glean from technology tend always to trace, explicitly or not, back to Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*: “Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times.” (66) Almost a century after Freud wrote those words, the present-day human still does not feel happy in his Godlike character. Indeed, it seems with each advance in technology, we grow closer

to godhood; but the more of these “auxiliary organs” we carry, the more trouble they give us.

Perhaps the most significant technological advance of the last half-century is the rapid development of networked communication. From early “bulletin board systems” to email, social media to VR, and the growing reliance on remote work and video meetings, technology has fundamentally altered how individual subjects communicate with one another. The effects of this shift to digital communication were predicted in early cyberpunk fiction – Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and Stephenson’s *Snow Crash*, most notably – to the extent where the neologism “cyberspace” from *Neuromancer* became commonplace shorthand for the full range of digital interactions. For the remainder of this paper, I will deploy the term “cyberspace” in this shorthand way, as reference to the web of networked communications comprising the internet, social media, and more. However, ultimately, the term “cyberspace” is somewhat misleading; as I will seek to demonstrate further below, cyberspace does not have much space in it at all.

This limitation – that I will be considering cyberspace specifically in how it mediates the relationship between individuals via networked, digital communication – opens two avenues of theorization. First, we can consider how cyberspace as a form of exterior reality is structured differently than non-cyberspace exterior reality. In psychoanalysis via Lacan, our experience of exterior reality is structured by the three orders: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. These three orders form the fundamental dimensions that “structure the human universe” (Žižek 1997, 222) and I will demonstrate how cyberspace has a distinctly different arrangement of those orders compared to non-cyberspace. By shifting our understanding of the three orders, we will

be able to see how cyberspace as an interpersonal communicative medium has a different structure and function to non-cyberspace communication. Beyond this, a reconsideration of the three orders will give us a lens through which to understand that central Lacanian concept: the *objet a*.

After arriving at cyberspace's *objet a* via a reconsideration of the three orders, I will shift to a discussion of the second triad of psychoanalytic concepts: desire, fantasy, and anxiety. These are all related to the individual subject – where the three orders structure exterior reality – thus, considering desire, fantasy, and anxiety in turn will allow us to see how the shifting relationship to external reality and interpersonal communication via the three orders impacts the subjectivity of the individual. Such is all to say: by theorizing how cyberspace changes how the individual subject relates to *others*, we can then understand how cyberspace changes how the individual subject relates to *itself*. Once I have demonstrated the full insight cyberspace and psychoanalysis can lend each other, I will turn to the future and offer an argument for the unique theoretical power of psychoanalysis to reconfigure our individual and collective relationships to cyberspace for the better.

The aim of this essay is threefold: First, to provide a clear and concise overview of some of psychoanalysis's core concepts: the three orders, the *objet a*, and the triad anxiety–desire–fantasy. Second, to demonstrate how precisely our understanding of these core concepts must shift and update when viewing them in the light of the omnipresence of networked communications, hereafter called cyberspace. Third, to show that psychoanalysis – rather than being incompatible with or irrelevant in the digital moment

– is uniquely well-suited to theorizing the effects and impacts of this cyberspace on how individual subjects relate to the world around them and how they relate to themselves.

In his foundational text *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Slavoj Žižek placed Lacan and Hegel front and center in a deliberate attempt to show that the only way to “save” the two seemingly incompatible philosophers was by thinking them together. It is the implicit thesis of the dominant Deleuzian, Guattarian, and Foucauldian theories of cyberspace that Lacan and psychoanalysis are backward, irrelevant, and ill-suited to the contemporary moment; as Žižek did in 1989, I will attempt to demonstrate the opposite. The subject of cyberspace is in dire need of a sit on the psychoanalyst’s couch, and the impact of cyberspace on our discourse and our public world can be understood in new, radical ways via the insight only psychoanalysis can provide.

CHAPTER 2: THE THREE ORDERS AND THE CYBERSPACE *a*

2.1. Imaginary, Symbolic, Real

Appendix I to Slavoj Žižek's *Plague of Fantasies* ("From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: The Sexual Act in Cinema") contains the following pithy definitions of Lacan's three orders. First is the real, "The 'hard', traumatic reality which resists symbolization." After the real is the symbolic, "The field of language, of symbolic structure and communication." Lastly, the imaginary: "The domain of images with which we identify, and which capture our attention." (222–223) I will complicate and expand upon Žižek's definitions in due course; for now, as a broad overview, they will serve as useful shorthand.

The three orders are one of a handful of Lacanian concepts that stretch across all of Lacan's thought and work and understanding them is arguably the fundamental "first step" of reaching fluency in psychoanalytic theory. It's even possible to delineate Lacan's decades-spanning career and the changes or developments in his thought by working backward up the chain:

- Early Lacan, of the "Mirror Stage" through his early seminars on Freud and the ego, is concerned primarily with the imaginary; here Lacan develops his theory of the ego as an external imaginary construct, located in the field of images with which the subject identifies.
- Middle Lacan, from the late 1950s to the 1960s (the latter half of the *Société Française de Psychanalyse* (SFP) through the formation of the *École Freudienne de*

Paris (EFP)) emphasized instead the symbolic and structures of signification; much of Lacan's best-known work originates from this era.

- Late Lacan, from the late 1960s until the dissolution of the EFP in 1980, was most concerned with those symbolic deadlocks and inconsistencies he called the real; most of Lacan's seminars from this era are unpublished or untranslated and it contains many of his more infuriatingly opaque concepts, but this "Lacan of the Real" is still the emphasis of much contemporary Lacanian scholarship, especially of Žižek and affiliated "Slovenian School" theorists.

Accordingly, in this chapter I will move one-by-one through the three orders: imaginary, to symbolic, to real. The three orders are utterly interlinked and can never be fully discussed in isolation; it is my hope that moving in this order will demonstrate their interconnection and impact on each other. Furthermore, this structure gives a sense of delving deeper into the function of cyberspace with each successive step. The imaginary gives us a way to consider the "surface" of cyberspace, inundated as it is with images, icons, graphics; but cyberspace, fundamentally, is a communicative medium, thus it is primarily symbolic in nature and structure. Pushing past the symbolic raises perhaps the most important question: what, and where, is the real of cyberspace? Answering this question will be the ultimate goal of this chapter and will lead directly to informed application in my subsequent arguments.

2.2. The Imaginary

2.2.1. The Ego

One of Lacan's earliest major revisions to Freudian psychoanalysis was his assertion that the Ego was *external* to the subject; that the ego, the supposed core of our

subjectivity, is actually located in the images around and outside of us. This is the focus of Lacan's 1954–1955 *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and the Technique of Psychoanalysis* with roots in Lacan's 1949 "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function." The latter essay elaborates that the ego is formed in response to the child's encounter with the field of ideal images (most notably, but not exclusively, their reflection in the mirror).

The infant – according to Lacan, "still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence" (*Écrits* 76) – crystallizes the image of a stable self (ego) in response to these images. The ego is thus not a stable internal kernel of selfhood; it is an imaginary construction, something the subject creates as a vision of themselves. Says Lacan in *Seminar II*, "In as much as we are the ego, not only do we experience it, but it is just as much a guide to our experience as the different registers that have been called guides in life, that is, sensations." Acting on behalf of the ego is thus not acting in ways that express our "authentic self"; acting on behalf of the ego is following a guidebook, created by the world around us.

Images, sensations, established external selves; are there not immediately echoes here of our everyday experiences with cyberspace – especially social media? I am far from the first person to consider the correlation between our cyberspace identities and this psychoanalytic theory of imaginary ego. Sherry Turkle's 1995 *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, a not-necessarily-utopian but certainly optimistic book, argues for cyberspace's potential for allowing us to experience and explore new modalities of being. Turkle embraces cyberspace's ability to allow individuals to try on

and take off identities like masks in cyberspace and elaborates on how these experiences can lead to new forms of self-knowledge.

Though now over a quarter-century old, I want to go back to Turkle's *Life on the Screen* and work through some of her basic schema. Although her text is now somewhat outdated, I believe her terminology and model can help us see and label more clearly the role and function of the imaginary in cyberspace; or, that is to say, how the subject's relationship to the imaginary of cyberspace is fundamentally different from the subject's relationship to the pre-cyberspace imaginary. Ultimately, we will need to move beyond Turkle's perspective; but I believe beginning from her text, which lays out a broad view of the digital that remains not uncommon, will allow us to see the strength of the Lacanian-psychoanalytic injunction into cyberspace.

2.2.2. Simulation and the GUI

One of Turkle's central arguments is that the explosion of digital technology was a deciding factor in the transition from "the modernist culture of calculation toward the postmodern culture of simulation." (19) This division of modernist calculation and postmodern simulation is illustrated by Turkle in terms of transparency and opacity: modernism is "transparent," in it you can see all the depth of gears turning and machines humming (this is perhaps best illustrated by the scene in *Modern Times* where Chaplin is fed through a long series of machines); postmodernism, by contrast, is a flat surface. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the experience of "modernist transparency" is often one of opacity (sure, you can see all the gears in the open grandfather clock – but you don't know what they do, nor how to read the time) and the experience of "postmodern

opacity" is often one of transparency (I have no clue how this digital clock works, but the screen says it is 9:30, so it must be 9:30.)

This postmodern layer of opaque images and misleading, faux transparency is what Turkle labels "simulation." We can thus see why it is imperative to begin our theoretical work with Lacan's imaginary. The layer of simulation, of images, is the top level of user interaction with basic, screened, digital devices, thus understanding how we relate to those images and how they are structured can lead us onward.

The graphical user interface – or GUI, pronounced "gooey" – is computer-lingo for the layer of interactable images and icons on any piece of digital technology. Computers and an early form of cyberspace existed before the GUI: the earliest of early computers were fed by punch cards, then personal computer terminals were developed which were entirely text-based. Already there is a screen of simulation present here: the text commands typed into early MS-DOS computers were being translated into hexadecimal "machine code" and eventually to binary; though user interactions were still limited to typing and executing text, the phenomenological experience was noticeably different. Learning to use a computer in the age of MS-DOS meant learning syntax and grammar not unlike learning a new language (in fact, exactly like learning a new language.) Though these computers are certainly still computers, certainly still by definition "postmodern" and "opaque," it was not until the widespread advent of GUIs that we can truly say Turkle's "culture of simulation" took hold.

The GUI itself is the collection of windows, icons, and other graphics on your computer – or phone, or television, or refrigerator – screen. It is how we interact with the software which then interacts with hardware. The stated goal of the GUI is to be more

transparent, easier to use, easier to understand than the old text-only terminals of computers past. Paradoxically, as noted by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun in *Programmed Visions*, the more “transparent” our devices become, the more obscured we are from their function.

Chun further notes that all interaction with the GUI is metaphorical. “Folders,” “Documents,” “Trash,” and so on; the simulation is a constant flow of metaphor. Chun writes: “Every use is also an act of faith: we believe these images and systems render us transparent not for technological, but rather for metaphorical, or more strongly ideological, reasons.” (17) We can here begin to situate the split between imaginary and symbolic in cyberspace; with that terminology, we can take Chun’s insistence on the centrality of metaphor and push it further. In Lacanese, the split between the interface of images we interact with and the actual functioning of code and binary “under the hood” is the split between the imaginary and the symbolic. Zizek writes, in *How to Read Lacan*, that one way to differentiate the symbolic from the imaginary is to think of a game of chess: the imaginary is how the pieces are shaped, while the symbolic is the rules by which the game proceeds. (8) Turtle’s simulation – the field of images we interact with – metaphorically related to the actual processes of code, is thus the cyberspace imaginary, the processes of code, the symbolic.

2.2.3. The Dominant Imaginary

Chun’s “act of faith” from her 2011 *Programmed Visions* echoes strongly one of Turtle’s puns from *Life on the Screen*: that, in the postmodern universe of simulation, we have become accustomed to taking things “at interface value.” That is to say: we do not attempt to look beyond the surface of our interactions with the imaginary simulation.

Both cases involve what Žižek labels “a *phenomenological* attitude, an attitude of trusting the phenomena.” (*Plague of Fantasies* 168) As laid out above: the specific phenomena Žižek refers to are the function of the GUI, the play of images and icons and windows. What Žižek does not emphasize that I want to highlight is as follows: Outside cyberspace, one function of the imaginary is to “paper over” inconsistencies in the symbolic (in other words – the real.) When working through the simulation, the imaginary goes beyond covering those real cracks in the symbolic and *obscures the symbolic itself*. In other words, in cyberspace, the imaginary holds a central position; we are always only ever interacting with the imaginary.

For the full implications of this centrality of the imaginary, I will go back to where I began: with the ego. As discussed above, the ego is a function of the imaginary in the sense that it is created or crystallized in the field of images. The infant identifies an “ideal-I” outside of themselves and assembles an ego modeled on that ideal; crucially, an ideal that the ego only ever approaches *asymptotically* (*Écrits* 76). Such is to say: our imaginary ego, modeled after idealized images to provide a sense of stability holding together our fractured and disoriented selves, itself *still* can never become perfect or whole. I believe it is this element of the ego – that it still experiences lack – that allows Lacan to not outright condemn the ego as a useless illusion.

Turkle, in *Life on the Screen*, is borderline hostile to Lacan on his theory of the ego; she claims Lacan views the ego as “something we create with smoke and mirrors.” (139) Though Lacan certainly wishes to decenter the ego and look beyond the imaginary, he harbors no belief that the ego is somehow a harmful illusion to be dispelled. What Lacan warns against is not the ego or the imaginary per se, but rather those who adhere

too closely to, or center, the ego and the imaginary. Lacan does this because, as he says, “the images of our subject are buttoned down in the text of his history, they are enmeshed in the symbolic order.” (*Seminar II* 257) Outside cyberspace, the imaginary can have no existence outside its inscription in the symbolic. The images we encounter must have a reference point in the symbolic structure of our lives and our culture to have any meaning whatsoever. The same holds true for cyberspace: if we accept the division of cyberspace into simulation : imaginary and code : symbolic, the images we encounter in the simulation would not exist if they were not constructed and anchored in (inaccessible) code.

To take cyberspace “at interface value” is to be content with this layer of imaginary simulation; and to stay at the layer of imaginary simulation is to remain centered on the ego. Our ego now has more images than ever before to compare itself against. The psychoanalytic insight is thus: it is not that these personas or accounts we create in our name or image are somehow alternate from our core self; our “core self,” our ego, is always-already “alternate.” This is the essence of Žižek’s original criticism of Turkle in 1997: “A cyberspace agent is not ‘another subject’ but simply the subject’s *ego*, ego as the subject’s supplement – it is, of course, a kind of ‘alter ego’, but Lacan’s point is that ego itself is always-already ‘alter’ with regards to the subject whose ego it is.” (*Plague of Fantasies* 182) This is not meant to reject outright some of the insights of Turkle’s original book. For example, many closeted queer youth can use cyberspace’s ease of alter-ego creation to explore modes of subjectivity they may be denied at home; the danger to be avoided is thus to not introduce a hierarchy between offline selves and online alter egos. Our ego is, by its definition, “alter.”

Lacan sought not to *abolish* the ego or to out it as a hollow illusion, but to *decenter* the ego and to look beyond the imaginary. Cyberspace, dominated as it is by the imaginary, is therefore *also dominated by the ego*. It is not that we subjects have a single, stable identity and cyberspace gives us the freedom to experiment with alternate ones; our “single, stable identity” is already “alternate.” All cyberspace does is provide a frictionless, image-obsessed playground in which our egos can take center stage – for better or worse.

2.2.4. All I see is blonde, brunette, redhead...

Perhaps the paradigmatic figure of cyberspace’s structural emphasis on the imaginary and the ego is Joe Pantoliano's Cypher from *The Matrix*. Cypher has been awoken to the truth of reality, he has "taken the red pill," and in one memorable scene describes how he can "read" the endlessly scrolling green text of the Matrix: "I don't even see the code," Cypher says. "All I see is blonde, brunette, redhead..." This scene, and Cypher’s behavior and eventual betrayal of the protagonists, demonstrates flawlessly the danger of allowing the imaginary to hold center stage in our interactions with cyberspace.

The scene begins with a slow fade-in from black, with Cypher seated exactly center frame facing a wall of computer monitors. As the scene fades in from black, it is the blue-green glow of the monitors that we can see first, then as the camera dollies closer to Cypher, his face turned away from us, their glow lights the room. The camera then cuts to a close shot over Cypher’s shoulder, angled a few degrees to the right from the previous shot; Cypher’s face is still obscured, and we can now see he is most closely watching the three largest monitors, all displaying the descending green text of the Matrix’s code. A shadow crowds the frame from the left, obscuring the Matrix code from

view, and pauses for a moment. Cypher turns and notices the shadow – Neo – with a loud start. Visually, formally, we are shown already the contrast between Cypher and Neo: Cypher, surrounded by screens, will in his obsession with the imaginary and his ego eventually betray Neo; Neo, whose entry to the frame literally blocks out the scrolling green text of the Matrix, will, in embracing his power to bend the rules of the Matrix as The One, push past the allure of the imaginary to grip the Matrix’s symbolic directly.

After Cypher spots Neo, he immediately turns off a majority of the screens he was just looking at, leaving only the scrolling text of the Matrix. Looking at the Matrix’s iconic green text, Neo asks, "Do you always look at it encoded?" To which Cypher replies, "Well, you have to. The image translators work *for* the construct program." Cypher explains that there’s entirely too much information to fully decode the Matrix, so they’re stuck looking only at fragments of raw green code. By saying that the “image translators” work for the “construct program,” Cypher is saying what I claimed above regarding the imaginary and the symbolic: the imaginary is subservient to the symbolic, in the sense that you cannot have images without the underlying symbolic structure. Following this is Cypher’s most telling line: “You get used to it though. All I see is blonde, brunette, redhead...” This line likely tips off any keen-eared viewers of *The Matrix*: if the image translators “work for the construct program,” and Cypher can translate the code to images in his head, doesn’t that mean Cypher also works for the construct program?

Cypher – from “cipher,” a term from cryptography and codebreaking – is the designated “hacker” of the *Nebuchadnezzar*. The figure of the hacker is the character who is supposed to be able to “see beyond” the code; Cypher’s “blonde, brunette, redhead”

line, a joke or not, demonstrates this. Thus, both in name and function in the crew, Cypher is the character who should be able to grasp the truth of the Matrix. But, of course, he doesn't – Cypher betrays the crew for the opportunity to un-learn what he knows, to return to a life of sensual bliss plugged into the Matrix. By “seeing beyond” the code, by seeing visualizations of code instead of the code itself, Cypher does not grasp the truth of the Matrix; he loses sight of it. It is only by comprehending the Matrix *as code* that its truth can be understood, by looking *beyond* the images. It is this power, the power to look beyond the all-consuming images, that gives Neo his powers as The One; he is able to ignore the reality constructed by the images of the Matrix and interact with the code as code, granting Neo the superpowers he uses in the film's third act. Cypher looks past the code and is seduced by images, leading to his downfall; Neo looks past the images and grasps the code itself, leading to his ascension.

Thus, though the imaginary has an iron grip over our interactions with cyberspace, we cannot allow ourselves to remain at “interface value.” Cypher was right about one thing: it's impossible to grasp all of cyberspace's data at once. To work through the difficulties of this obscured, impenetrable code, we will turn next to Lacan's second order: the symbolic.

2.3. The Symbolic

2.3.1. Beyond Interface Value

A brief, vulgar reiteration of my claim regarding the imaginary above is as follows: in cyberspace, the imaginary is put into overdrive. We are bombarded with images of such fidelity, volume, and frequency that it becomes harder and harder to look past the imaginary; and, because our ego is located in the imaginary, we lose the

motivation to even *want* to look past the imaginary. This dominance of the imaginary keeps us trapped in our ego(s); atomized, isolated, constantly supplied with new images and frictionless space in which to sit idly and comfortably. Žižek in *Plague of Fantasies* puts it well: "We perceive color and outline, no longer depth and volume." (171) Thus, to see beyond color and outline, we must turn to the symbolic. Lacan's symbolic – the order of language, signs, and communication – is, in cyberspace, distorted and occluded by the ceaseless torrent of images. However, it does not take much digging to uncover the truth: our phenomenological experience of cyberspace – taking things "at interface value" – may be dominated by the imaginary, but cyberspace itself is, at its core, symbolic. Lacan recognized this in his *Seminar II* in 1955, saying "The cybernetic message is a sequence of signs. And a sequence of signs always comes down to a series of 0s and 1s." (304) This is what is beyond "interface value" – the interface is a simulation masking the inherently symbolic structure and function of cyberspace.

By turning to the symbolic, we can begin to demonstrate the strength of a psychoanalytic reading of cyberspace against a more phenomenological approach like that of Turkle. As Cypher points out in my *Matrix* example above: there's no way to comprehend the entirety of the data and code of cyberspace. Even if I could read binary, where would I begin? How would I read it all, and in what order would I read it? The impossibility of "reading" the code constitutive of cyberspace has led to much dismissal of any linguistic approach to understanding the digital; cyberspace simply is not a text to be "read," thus approaches emphasizing language are not needed. I agree entirely with this assessment. However, the strength of psychoanalysis via Lacan is having the tools to understand how the linguistic *structure* of something can still impact how it functions,

even if what is precisely written there is inaccessible. A linguistic approach to cyberspace is not one that supposes to unfold the entirety of cyberspace in a single text document to be scoured and analyzed; rather, a linguistic approach to cyberspace is one that acknowledges the shared features of symbolic, linguistic structures writ large and attempts to understand how those features emerge from and impact cyberspace. Cyberspace is, in the final instance, inherently symbolic; the binary flow of voltage, digitized as zeroes and ones, are coded symbolic messages and instructions. We will first investigate this claim more closely, then we will turn to our final question: what is it that *can't* be transmitted in zeroes and ones?

2.3.2. Cyberspace is Structured like a Language

What is perhaps most fascinating about cyberspace is not its difference from non-cyberspace language or symbolic structure, but its similarity. Lacan noticed this in 1955, writing that astonishment around the new technology was perhaps because cybernetics entailed a rediscovery echoing Freud, that "this human language works almost by itself, seemingly to outwit us." Lacan further insists that "Language is certainly there, completely vibrant, in these machines." (119) I would take this one step further – it is not simply that language exists *in* the machines, but that without language, the machines wouldn't function at all.

One of Lacan's most well-known and oft-repeated aphorisms is, "The unconscious is structured like a language." In other words, that the unconscious – though strictly inaccessible, comprehensible only when it erupts unbidden in jokes, dreams, etc. – has a sort of "grammar," has rules and a structure the same way a spoken or written language might. Anyone with even a beginner's understanding of

cyberspace knows that computers also have “grammar,” rules, and structure, for their internal chains of signifying elements. Much like how our unconscious is unknowable, inaccessible, and yet created and structured by our immersion in language, cyberspace – software – is largely unknowable and inaccessible but still ultimately created by and structured like a language.

Does this then make cyberspace some kind of auxiliary, exterior unconscious? Wendy Hui Kyong Chun in *Programmed Visions* sounds like she comes close to that stance: writing that software’s inability to be truly known can be “an enabling condition,” Chun claims we can then “engage the surprises generated by a programmability that, try as it might, cannot entirely prepare us for the future.” (54) Of course, Lacan would claim that our unconscious is *already* exterior; “The fact that the symbolic is located outside of man is the very notion of the unconscious.” (*Écrits* 392) Once again, we see that what is remarkable about cyberspace is not so much its *differences* from our non-digital symbolic but its *similarities*. To continue this reasoning beyond the symbolic, we will need to take a step back and defend the viability of the psychoanalytic-linguistic approach to understanding cyberspace.

2.3.3. Copjec Contra Chun

Chun’s approach in *Programmed Visions* emphasizes the ephemerality and unknowability of software. Of programming languages, Chun writes they “offer the lure of visibility, readability, logical if magical cause and effect.” (47) Ultimately, Chun sees the unknowability and ephemerality of software and cyberspace as a positive, enabling condition (54) and that seeing code as a source of causality in

cyberspace is missing the point that power lies not in the code but in the social and machinic relations created and reflected therein. Viewing code as the pathway to understanding and freedom – “the ability to map and know the workings of the machine” (51) – is a flawed view, as it erases the gap between code-as-written and code-as-executed. This view of code rejected by Chun, this “ability to map and know,” could be reframed by saying that cyberspace – software – has no metalanguage.

I agree entirely with Chun’s assertion that we must reject the possibility of a metalanguage, of any metaprinciple at all, purporting to comprehending cyberspace in its entirety. Chun’s argument shares perhaps more than a passing similarity to the stance attributed to Foucault by Joan Copjec in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Copjec charges Foucault precisely with rejecting the linguistic model in favor of the battle-based model – an analytical model which emphasizes relations of power and knowledge within a society – due to what Foucault sees as the inherent idealism of the linguistic model. Copjec rejects the notion that linguistic analysis is idealist; for an object to have verifiable, objective, existence “materially depends on its being *articulated in language*.” (8) While I again agree with Chun on her assertion that a metalinguistic view of code as the ultimate map to cyberspace is flawed, an outright rejection of the linguistic model for understanding software seems to neglect the fact that for a digital object or process to verifiably exist at all it must therefore be *articulated in code*.

Copjec ultimately agrees with Foucault’s camp that there can be no metalanguage, that the whole of society will never reveal itself in a single moment

or be mappable onto a single diagram. Rather, to assert there is no metalanguage is to acknowledge that society “*never stops realizing* itself, that it *continues* to be formed over time.” (9) This description applies flawlessly to the constantly expanding, ever-shifting, unknowable status of cyberspace, and I believe the further conclusions Copjec draws thus also apply to the digital. Acknowledging the impossibility of metalanguage, to Copjec, allows us to see the split between a society’s (or, cyberspace’s) positive, observable, relations and facts and that same society’s (or, cyberspace’s) “being,” its generative principle. That generative principle is then installed elsewhere, outside the realm of positive and observable appearances, which then allows for the creation of a space for society that can be filled by relations. This generative principle – the impossible metalanguage – is never statable as such, must *remain* unstatable. It is both necessary and impossible; it has no positive content.

Thus, when Chun writes that code must be considered a “set of relations, rather than an enclosed object” (54) she is already implicitly positing a space in which those very relations can function. What, then, is the generative principle of cyberspace? Where is it located? Chun herself already referenced it once: the gap between code-as-written and code-as-executed. It is not that code is “the first language that actually does what it says” – a quote from Alexander Galloway’s “Language Wants to be Overlooked” rightly criticized by Chun (22) – but that there is always necessarily a minimal gap *between* what the code says and what it does, that unspoken impossibility which opens the space of software’s possibility. In other words, this “unspoken impossibility” points us toward the real of cyberspace.

2.4. The Real

To briefly recap what we've worked through so far: the symbolic is the order of signs, language, and communication, and the imaginary is the order of idealized images in the visual field; furthermore, any inconsistencies or ruptures (that is, any emergences of the real) in the symbolic are meant to be covered or obscured by the imaginary. Cyberspace is an interactive construct of the symbolic, with a minimal gap between code-as-written and code-as-executed, which I have above associated with the real; that gap is what is covered by the imaginary.

In other words: the real is what is impossible in the symbolic. Lacan's aphorism from *Television* – "Saying it all is materially impossible: words fail. Yet it is through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real." (3) – captures this definition in typically cryptic style. His "words" which fail is the symbolic; the full truth of subjectivity can never be captured in mere words. Thus, the real is not mere words. Something always escapes, something is always left unsaid. This unsaid "thing," which Lacan will call the *objet a*, will shortly conclude our discussion of Lacan's three orders and their unique importance to understanding cyberspace; furthermore, the unique relationship cyberspace places its subjects in with this *objet a* will lead to demonstrating psychoanalytically informed impacts of the proliferation of cyberspace on both individual subjects and discourse more broadly.

2.4.1. Uncomputable

The essential function of cyberspace is computation. By "computation," I mean the essential function of cyberspace is in that movement from code-as-written to code-as-executed. Though digital devices can do a pretty good job of appearing to write or speak,

that writing and speaking comes as a result of computation. Thus, outside cyberspace, we see the real when words – signification – fails; inside cyberspace, we see the real when *computation* fails. The real is not a transcendent Beyond, an existing thing or place. The real is rather inherent *to* the symbolic, the internal stumbling block, an impossibility only accessible via the failure of the process attempting to locate it.

If the non-cyberspace real is unspeakable, the cyberspace real is thus uncomputable. It emerges when the passage from written to executed code is interrupted or distorted. When computation works as intended, the gap from written to executed is seamlessly covered by the imaginary; when computation fails, we come face-to-face with the real of cyberspace. That is – we come face-to-face with the limitations of cyberspace. Errors, glitches, crashes, bugs, these are our encounters with the real of cyberspace.

A slightly different definition of “uncomputable” is proposed by Alexander Galloway in his book *Uncomputable: Play and Politics in the Long Digital Age*. Galloway’s uncomputable, not unlike mine and Lacan’s, is as “a mode of being in which discrete symbols do not take hold” (1). Further, Galloway offers four distinct “types” of uncomputability: “analog life,” “rational paradox,” “practical limit,” and “the indiscernible and the indeterminate” (3). Of the fourth – indiscernible and indeterminate – Galloway spends some time discussing how “randomness and contingency have been incorporated into the body of computation,” noting that techniques like anti-aliasing and procedural randomness are frequently employed in contemporary new media (4). Galloway concludes by claiming that “Today the computable is closely intertwined with

the uncomputable.” Forgive me if this question sounds naïve: if something can be computed, does that not by definition mean it is *computable*?

After defining “the indiscernible and the indeterminate,” Galloway transitions smoothly to “randomness and contingency.” I firmly disagree that one can group these things together. Even Galloway's invocation of "procedural randomness" tips his hand here: "procedural randomness" is not truly random; it is, as in the name, procedural. "Procedural randomness" follows specific, computable rules and generates specific, computable outcomes. The algorithms and processes followed can create a wide array of possible outputs that may be unexpected to the user but are never uncomputable by the machine. Procedural randomness is more like rolling a set of dice than the generation of something truly new and unexpected. It still exists within the symbolic bounds of cyberspace. Galloway here appears to be in the phenomenological mode I have earlier criticized; the user experience is something unexpected, thus there is no reason to look beyond that. I disagree firmly.

These processes – "procedural randomness," "anti-aliasing" – are not truly uncomputable because they *are computed*. What Galloway here is pointing to is a kind of simulated uncomputability. The imaginary screen of simulation combined with layers and layers of incredibly complex code can create the phenomenological surface effect of randomness and contingency. However, don't let the simulation fool you: if a computing process completes itself successfully, it thus involved no element that was *truly* "uncomputable.” The uncomputable – the real – can only emerge from a point or a moment of failure.

2.4.2. Objectified Impossibility

To say something is computable is to say that *it makes sense*; something is "computable" when the pieces fit together, when the passage from code-as-written to code-as-executed proceeds apace. Galloway's "uncomputable" above takes on a meaning more like "the not-yet computed." And it is true that *some* uncomputabilities simply await being made computable. Technology is constantly growing more advanced, the processes of cyberspace growing greater in complexity, hardware grows more capable of handling more and more simultaneous processes, and so on. This same process occurs in our non-cyberspace lives; emergences of the impossible real can be traumatic, disruptive, or halt progress, but eventually they are symbolized, incorporated into positive symbolic reality. In the same way, cyberspace grows in ways to fix bugs, avoid glitches, recover from crashes, and so on.

Yet, no matter how vast cyberspace grows, it will never be free of the uncomputable real. There will always be that which does not fit. Lacan identifies this "that which does not fit" as the *objet a*, the remainder, the leftover of signification which is itself not signifiable. Within cyberspace our *objet a* must then be that which is not *computable*. Thus, the *objet a* is an embodiment of the uncomputable.

The *objet a* has no actual objective existence but is rather a necessary presumption central to understanding many of Lacan's more elaborate theorizations. The *a* is the object-embodiment of lack itself, of nothing; it does not exist, but it impacts the field of objects *as if it did*. Rather than seeing "nothing" as the blank canvas against which our lives and existences are projected, Lacan's *objet a* gives us a way to consider nothingness – lack – as an object itself. Joan Copjec in *Read My Desire* claims that the

objet a is necessarily nonempirical; the *objet a* is instead the supplementary, arbitrary object which is added to a set of objects to “close” that set. Such is to say: for a set (of objects, signifiers, etc.) to be “complete,” it necessarily must exclude at least one object. The *objet a* thus “sutures” the set of objects closed. As above, the *objet a* is a necessary fiction; it impacts the field of objects or signifiers around it *as if* it did exist, but ultimately it does not.

It is with the *objet a* that the full importance of maintaining a linguistic approach – that is, not ceding to an approach which views code solely as a flow of relations – to cyberspace is made clear. Without the psychoanalytic view, we cannot imagine an “outside” of cyberspace; without the *a*, we can only ever think *within* that series of relations. Of course, as I have attempted to demonstrate thus far, cyberspace plays by slightly different rules than does the non-cyberspace symbolic. We will need to take a closer look at the *a*, computation, and return to the imaginary to see the full impact of this approach.

2.4.3. Lacan’s Gaze

Lacan’s original theory of the *objet a* was that it belonged to the order of the imaginary and not the real. This was in the 1950s; as we may recall, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, it was not until the 1960s that Lacan really began to theorize the real in its full radicality, thus it is not until partway through Lacan’s career that the *a* takes on its full weight. Even then, the *a* maintains a dual existence as both real *and* imaginary; the imaginary – that is, in the visual field, the field of images – embodiment of the *objet a* is what Lacan labels the *gaze*.

Joan Copjec's essay "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and Lacan" (in *Read My Desire*) provides an invaluable explanation of the theoretical conflict surrounding early adaptations of Lacan's theory of gaze in film theory. In short: Copjec sees early film theorists – such as Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey – as fundamentally misunderstanding Lacan's gaze. These early applications of the gaze, in Lacan's name, emphasized the gaze as stemming from the camera pointing at the subject of the film or from the viewers themselves at the screen. This theory of gaze further borrowed from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, turning the screen into a mirror, from which the panoptic gaze emanated. This was of special importance to feminist film theory; as writes Copjec, "The panoptic gaze defines *perfectly* the situation of the woman under patriarchy: that is, it is the very image of the structure that obliges the woman to monitor herself with a patriarchal eye." (17) This panoptic theory of gaze holds more water today – the age of digital surveillance, the NSA, and so on – than it even did in the 1970s. However, crucially, and as Copjec goes to great lengths to explain: this theory of gaze is simply *not* Lacan's position. Invoking Lacan in this theory of the gaze, as Mulvey and Metz often did, accomplishes what Copjec calls a "Foucauldization" of Lacan; it lifts Lacan's terminology and uses Lacan's name, but the argument it stages is fundamentally that of Foucault.

Contra what Copjec rightly sees as a deeply misleading application of Lacan, she sets out to re-center the truth of Lacan's theory of the gaze. As above, Lacan's gaze is an embodiment of the elusive *objet a* in the visual field. This gaze is the unoccupiable point, it is that which is unrevealed. This gaze is certainly not located in the eye of the viewer, nor in the lens of the camera; Lacan's gaze is not even so much located *in* the image as

behind it. The subject experiences the screen of representation – the symbolic network, the imaginary field – as somehow hiding something. Lacan’s point is that the screen of representation is in fact hiding nothing at all. Nevertheless, the subject *experiences* the feeling that something is indeed beyond the screen of representation, beyond signification; for Lacan, the subject is not reducible to the symbolic.

This is the purpose of Lacan’s parable of his fishing trip in *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. In this story, Lacan’s fishing companion points to a gleaming sardine can and gleefully informs the young Lacan that he can see the can, but the can does not see him back. The subject desires to see some truth beyond the veil of representation, to be confirmed or validated by this gaze of the other, but the subject will have no such luck. That “something” beyond representation – the gaze behind the screen – is thus not a panoptic apparatus tracking you but a *blind eye*. It does not see you, it does not confirm you, it does not validate or complete you. This blind gaze, the embodiment of the *objet a* in the visual field, is (as above) a necessary fiction.

Returning to cyberspace: in *Plague of Fantasies*, Slavoj Žižek briefly addresses the problem of the gaze in virtual reality (VR). Žižek writes: “As Lacan put it – without a *blind spot* in the field of vision, without this elusive point from which the object returns the gaze, we no longer ‘see something’.” (171) Žižek points here to what I believe is the crucial psychoanalytic insight into cyberspace: it *occludes the gaze*. More specifically: the gaze is occluded in cyberspace because, as I outlined above, it is impossible to comprehend the entirety of cyberspace in a single moment. In all the classic filmic examples of the gaze, recognizing that “blind spot,” where representation fails, depends on the subject being able to see *all* of the image at once. By seeing the entire frame – or

the entire painting – the subject can pick out the empty place where the gaze ought to be. This is why traditional filmic examples of the gaze can still be recognized via cyberspace versions of visual art; there are certainly differences (noticeable or not) between watching a digital copy of a movie and watching a projected film print, though in both cases you are seeing the entire frame. When dealing with cyberspace – or playing a video game – your screen is a window through which you are only ever seeing *some* of the possible content at any one time. Because the entirety of cyberspace – or the entirety of a video game, or the entirety of another piece of digital media – is never comprehensible in a single visual moment, we can never get our bearings enough to locate the gaze.

2.4.4. The Real, Occluded

To recap a few things: the *objet a* is an objectified piece of the real, the nonempirical object excluded from any set of objects which thus closes that set. The *objet a* has also an imaginary component, a counterpart in the visual field, which Lacan calls the gaze. In cyberspace, I have argued that the essential function is not signification but computation: the process of shifting from code-as-written to code-as-executed. It is this process of computation which distorts the real. Written or transcribed code, be it high-level languages like Python or C# down to hexadecimal machine code or even binary, still functions exclusively as symbolic. As Lacan noted in 1955: language lives inside of these machines, they are made of language, they follow the rules of language. This is not to say the entirety of cyberspace can be known by simply unfolding the symbolic structure of machines – as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun rightly notes, code is only part of the process, and attempting to view it as a metalanguage or map is flawed. Code is not only written, but also executed.

If we take code-as-written – let’s say down to binary, down to the lowest possible level of processing – as the true “symbolic” of cyberspace, we can thus understand that the *objet a* is what cannot be expressed via the flow of zeroes and ones. When discussing cybernetics in his 1955 seminar, Lacan marvels at the flow of binary, of how these machines are built on the alternation of presence and absence. However, the problem is as such: binary, the procedure of zeroes and ones, is *not* the alternation of presence and absence. Alexander Galloway, in *Uncomputable*, rightly defines digital technology as that which operates via *pure difference*. (111) The representations “0” and “1” are arbitrary; all that you need for a piece of digital technology is something which can register the flow of difference as such. Thus, contra Lacan, binary digital technology is not the alternation of presence and absence – it is the alternation of two different presences. What is precisely missing from the digital is *absence itself*. The *objet a*, absence given body, is what is excluded from the flow of binary which allows for binary to function as such.

In our typical non-cyberspace symbolic structures, we engage with and experience the symbolic much more freely and consciously. Thus, it is much easier to notice or locate those things which are not expressible symbolically; this is the experience of the gaze, the blind spot, the illusion of the beyond of representation. In cyberspace, however, we do not interact with code directly, as written. We interact with the code *as executed*. Even writing code itself is still interacting with executed code in the form of operating systems, text processors, and more. As I claimed much earlier in this chapter: it is the function of the imaginary in cyberspace to not only occlude the gaps and breaks in the symbolic structure, but to *occlude the symbolic structure itself*. Shifting

from code-as-written to code-as-executed – the process of computation – is the very process that occludes that symbolic structure. The real is not a transcendent beyond to the symbolic but is the internal “stumbling block” of the symbolic itself; thus, the execution of code – when code becomes interactive software or produces a result or navigates a process – subjects the symbolic of written code to distortion by the imaginary. The result is interacting with coded software that must necessarily follow the rules of a symbolic structure that we ourselves are not privy to. Cyberspace is constructed of code, a symbolic structure through and through, but one that is executed in such a way as to “fill in” any voids, blind spots, or impossibilities that emerge in the symbolic itself.

It is not that in cyberspace the real is eliminated entirely; as mentioned above, we encounter the real of cyberspace whenever Microsoft Word crashes, whenever a laptop update makes our wireless internet stop working, whenever we are given an error message. But, crucially, even these malfunctions are still being routed through the process of executed code. It is easier to “feel” the boundaries in place when we run up against them, but the real is kept at a distance. Where outside of cyberspace an encounter with the real – though often traumatic – can lead to a rearranging of our symbolic universe, in cyberspace there is no such luck. Rather than changing our perceived symbolic reality, all that an encounter with a cyberspace real glitch accomplishes is the feeling of running into a concrete wall.

Precisely what is occluded from cyberspace is absence itself. This insight is only accessible via psychoanalysis, and specifically by careful application of Lacan’s theory of the *objet a*. The *objet a* – which Lacan considered his only genuinely original contribution to the field – animates many of psychoanalysis’ most crucial concepts and

structures. That in cyberspace the *objet a* is occluded – our “little piece of the real” is missing, buried in layers of code and simulation – has major implications for any psychoanalytic theory of cyberspace. Now that we have excavated our way through Lacan’s three orders and come to understand the importance of the *objet a*, I will turn to our second group of major psychoanalytic concepts to build on everything discussed so far and consider how cyberspace’s unique relationship to the real changes how those structures work.

CHAPTER 3: THE CYBERSPACE SUBJECT

3.1. Desire, Fantasy, Anxiety

The imaginary, the symbolic, and the real form a triad in Lacan's thought, and their interlocking is what constructs the subject's experience of external reality. Late in his career, Lacan would come to view his three orders as the tripartite "Borromean knot:" three rings, interlinked in such a way that severing one ring causes all three to separate. (Fink 123) You cannot have one without the others. In cyberspace, though I have argued that the real *objet a* is occluded by the processes of computation, it still has a part to play. In other words, cyberspace still has to play by the rules of imaginary/symbolic/real, though their relationships and function are slightly skewed or altered compared to before or outside cyberspace. The question is then: if cyberspace alters the three orders which construct the subject's experience of reality, how does that in turn affect the subject itself? Lacan has a second conceptual triad concerned only with the foundation and construction of the subject: desire, anxiety, and fantasy. Crucially, all three terms here are deeply intertwined with the *objet a* which, as I discussed above, easily becomes occluded or distorted by the computation processes inherent to cyberspace. Now that we understand how cyberspace impacts the *objet a*, we can trace the effects of that impact from exterior reality toward the individual subject.

Desire, fantasy, and anxiety form a triad which is not unlike imaginary, symbolic, real in the sense that they are inextricably intertwined, but where the three orders structure our *experience* of exterior reality, desire, fantasy, and anxiety structure our *response* to exterior reality. All three share a concern with the *objet a*, the arbitrary nonempirical object-embodiment of nothing. Lacan, informed by structural linguistics,

believes implicitly that there can be no subject without an object towards which to be oriented; the *objet a* takes the place of the ultimate object. As in my discussion of the gaze above, the gaze stands *behind* the veil of representation. Thus, we can take the *objet a* to be that object *beyond* whatever specific, empirical object we desire. This is what Lacan means when he claims the *objet a* is the “object-cause of desire”: the *objet a* is not itself the object of our desire, the object we wish to obtain, but is that object which is just beyond the object of our desire. The *objet a* is what is in the object of our desire that is *more* than the object of our desire, that extra wrinkle that makes the object of our desire stand out from the general field of objects. Of course, once we obtain the object of our desire, we find the *objet a* quite suddenly disappears. This is the basic structure of desire, which is, for Lacan, utterly central to subjectivity.

Fantasy, then, is *how* we desire; that is to say, fantasy provides the coordinates for telling us which objects to desire and is found in the relation between subject and object. It is with fantasy that we begin to truly see the impacts of cyberspace; as I will demonstrate below, the proper functioning of fantasy depends on space between subject and object. We will soon find that, despite the name, cyberspace does not have much “space” at all. It is this lack of space – what I will argue is the fundamentally closed, finite structure of cyberspace – that leads us to anxiety. Anxiety, defined by Lacan, is much more concerned with overbearing presence than overwhelming absence. Defining and understanding anxiety in this admittedly heterodox way will allow us to see that the dominant effect – and affect – of cyberspace is to induce anxiety. Only by working through first the three orders, then walking from desire to fantasy to anxiety, will we be

able to comprehend the magnitude of cyberspace's impact on the subject; and, crucially, to begin the hard work of attempting to counter that impact.

3.2. Desire

3.2.1. The Object–Cause of Desire

Above, I claimed that Lacan saw no subjectivity which was not in some way oriented toward an object. Left unsaid there was what Lacan posits as the reason for this: Lacan sees subjectivity as always oriented toward an object because subjectivity is originally founded on the *loss* of an object. The lost, original object can never be found again because it never held empirical existence in the first place. This theory of desire results from Lacan's linguistic intervention into Freud; the process by which we lose this nonexistent original object is what Lacan terms "symbolic castration." (Fink 100) When the subject enters into language – into the symbolic – the subject is made aware of the limitations of the symbolic and feels that there must be something "beyond." This "beyond" – the real – is, as outlined above, not really beyond but the inherent and interior stumbling block to the symbolic. It should be noted that the *objet a* is not consubstantial with this original lost object; rather, the *objet a* – as discussed above – exists within or beyond the object of our desire. We don't mistake the object of our desire for the original lost object, rather, the *objet a* attracts our desire toward an object which we think might replace or make up for the original lost object. Of course, it never does.

This theory of desire may initially seem to clash with my previous assertion that it is precisely the *objet a* that is occluded by the processes structuring cyberspace. If the *a* is occluded, what is there to spark our desire? Furthermore, even a cursory glance at our interactions with cyberspace technology seems to make it clear that desire is functioning

– maybe even functioning in overdrive – when we’re “plugged in.” It’s easier than ever to purchase objects, consume media, browse images, communicate with those we are attracted to, and so on. How can these things be true if, as I have argued, the real *objet a* object–cause of our desire is hidden? To resolve this conundrum, I will need to introduce another of Lacan’s aphorisms: that “Man’s desire is the desire of the Other.” In Lacan’s *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* he repeats this phrase no fewer than seven times; in the lecture titled “Of The Subject Who Is Supposed To Know,” Lacan elaborates by insisting that the subject can *only* recognize their own desire at the level of the desire of the Other.

This typically slippery aphorism from Lacan has a number of possible interpretations. Does it mean that the subject desires the same object as the Other? Bruce Fink, in *The Lacanian Subject*, insists that the most important way to read Lacan here is structurally; that Lacan is saying the subject’s desire is *structured* like the Other’s. Fink asserts: “Man learns to desire *as an other*, as if he were some other person.” (54) Fink locates the origin of Lacan’s argument in early childhood, when the infant recognizes the lacking nature of their guardian and their guardian’s resulting, ambiguous, desire. The infant then responds to their own sensation of lack by trying to align their lack with the lack of their guardian; that is to say, the infant tries to be everything for their guardian, to fill their lack, and thus to fill the infant’s lack as well. Beyond simply the guardian or the succession of everyday little others that we encounter, our desire is formed in response to our experience of the Big Other. Lacan’s Big Other is the embodiment of the symbolic; it is, as Žižek puts it in *How to Read Lacan*, “Society’s unwritten constitution.” (8) But, as we have discussed, the symbolic is inherently limited and inconsistent. The Big Other is a

necessary presupposition granting the illusion of consistency to a symbolic field, but it is riddled with those same inconsistencies. Ultimately, the Big Other is sustained by the continued behavior of subjects acting *as if* it exists. Lacan was clear on this point – “The Big Other does not exist.” – but just because it does not exist does not mean that the Big Other does not impact our lives. Indeed, to Lacan, the nonexistence of the Big Other is an essential feature of the subject’s very foundation.

3.2.2. The Digital Big Other

It is precisely the *gaps* in the Big Other, in the symbolic structure or the ideological field, that give the subject room in which to constitute herself. Demonstrating the full radicality of this notion was one of Slavoj Žižek’s primary theoretical goals in his first major text, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). There, contra the then-dominant theoretical approach highlighting “processes of subjectivation” and the subject’s being caught up in the experience of various pre-subjective subject-positions, Žižek proposes a (then-)radical new grounding of the subject as *opposed* to subjectivation. To Žižek, if you subtract all different modes of subjectivation, remove the experience of the individual in their subject-position, “What remains is an empty place which was filled out with this richness; this original void, this lack of symbolic structure *is* the subject, the subject of the signifier.” (197) Žižek’s invocation of the signifier here should sound similar to Joan Copjec’s critique of Foucault I invoked above; in both cases, Lacan’s linguistic model is being used to demonstrate the failure of the relation-based Foucauldian model (Žižek, in *Sublime Object*, is really more concerned with critiquing Althusser, though his argument also applies to Foucault.) The emphasis on relations occludes the possibility of an outside, ignores the “empty place” which roots the subject against the processes of

subjectivation. This “empty place” is the gaps, breaks, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the symbolic, and the symbolic is embodied in the fictional Big Other, meaning that ultimately the subject is constituted out of the Big Other’s virtuality and inconsistency. This is what Lacan means when he claims that the subject is constitutively “decentered”; the foundation of the subject is located *outside the subject*, in the field of the other.

In other words: the subject’s individuality, the subject’s freedom, is rooted in the nonexistent/inconsistent Big Other. This is a central feature of Žižek’s thought over the last three decades, and he returns to it in 2020’s *Sex and the Failed Absolute* by attempting to measure the effects of digitalization – cyberspace – on the Big Other and the constitution of the subject. Here, Žižek rightly warns that with the advent and omnipresence of cyberspace, we can no longer quite so easily claim that the Big Other does not exist. Žižek writes: “The Big Other in a way falls into reality, it is no longer the symbolic Big Other in the sense of a virtual point of reference but a really-existing object out there in reality that is programmed to regulate and control us.” (168-169) Žižek then warns against taking this to mean that paranoia is the correct response; ultimately, this digital Big Other is a stupid, blind machine, overflowing with data. You are not being consciously manipulated by an omniscient network, but the very fact that this digital Big Other is now a positively-existing object – the network – and no longer a necessary fiction carries with it enormous implications.

As above – desire is constituted in the field of the other, in the abyss and inconsistencies we find in those around us and in the symbolic. But, when we are immersed in cyberspace, when the digital Big Other more and more displaces the traditional virtual-nonexistent Big Other, that abyss and those inconsistencies become

more and more difficult to find. Here we see the implications of the framework I detailed in the previous chapter; the real of cyberspace is hidden from us, occluded or inaccessible or only encountered in glitches and crashes. Instead, in cyberspace, we are submerged in a field of positivity. There is no void on which to get a foothold, and thus we are swept away by the flow of processes and relations endemic to the network itself. We are constantly regulated, registered, and pushed through designed experiences meant to produce specific responses. Žižek is right when he asserts that what is at risk with greater and greater digitalization is the decentered subject of psychoanalysis. When the subject is constituted in the blank space between processes of subjectivation, what happens to that subject in an environment where they have no blank space? What happens to our desire when it is grounded not in symbolic inconsistencies and lack, but in a series of predetermined, programmed, pathways and relations?

3.2.3. Designed Desire

Examples of the phenomenon I'm referring to above can be easily found in video games, especially in open-world video games. The open-world video game is a game where the player character is placed in a large, open environment with little direction given or only vague, optional goals to be completed. Hallmarks of the genre include the *Elder Scrolls* series, recent entries in the *Assassin's Creed* series, *Cyberpunk 2077*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and more. For the purposes of this example, I am going to focus on one game I have more than ample personal experience with: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. *Breath of the Wild* opens with your character – Link – waking from a century-long slumber inside a cave. There is only one direction you can go: out through the front door. Upon leaving the cave, *Breath of the Wild* takes control of Link away from

the player for the first and only time of the entire game (which can take upwards of 100 hours to “fully” complete): Link exits the cave, then runs out and up a small hill. The camera first pulls in close behind Link’s back as he runs up the hill, keeping the player’s vision of the surrounding world obscured. When Link reaches the top of the hill, he keeps running out to a small overlook while the camera stops, pulls back, cranes up, and pans ever so slightly to the left revealing a massive swath of open terrain. Link stands center frame at the bottom third of the shot as the camera holds still. The game’s title appears in the bottom left corner, but the player is looking elsewhere. The player is looking out at this massive expanse of world: straight ahead in the distance is a castle obscured by clouds, dwarfed to its left by a massive volcano belching smoke and fire. To the right a mountain juts up closer to Link, obscuring the view slightly, but the magnitude of space impresses upon the player that even this vista is but a fraction of the world to be explored.

From a game design standpoint, *Breath of the Wild* is a triumph. The designers – who had never made an open-world game before – understood the importance of landmarks. At all times, anywhere on the game’s huge map, the player can take a moment to look around and see the castle at the center of the map, the volcano or other distinct mountain ridges, towers, towns, and so on. Again, from a game design standpoint, this is genius; but it also means that the player is *never* made to feel completely lost. The player *always* has a destination, a reference point, a positive foothold. Furthermore, despite the surface-level ethos of “go anywhere, do anything,” most players begin *Breath of the Wild* the same way. After leaving the starting area, if players try to go straight to the castle in the middle of the map, they will get immediately defeated by very powerful castle guards. To the left is a sheer, rocky ridge, hostile and imposing. But to the right – which is also

the direction the first road players encounter is leading, *and* also the direction that the game's first explicit directed "quest" directs players to go – is what appears to be a massive mountain split in half vertically by a river, leaving room for a narrow road to pass through. With hostile enemies straight ahead, hostile terrain to the left, and a welcoming, intriguing path to the right, a vast majority of first-time players clearly choose to go right.

Perhaps the relevance of this example to our current discussion is apparent. Alfie Bown, in *The PlayStation Dreamworld*, rightly asserts that video games – therefore cyberspace technology writ large – are less interested in simply *fulfilling* our desires than they are in *organizing* them. Bown writes that games and digital technology fulfill, anticipate, and determine our desires; that "what is much scarier than the fact that the user can fulfill desire via the mobile phone is the possibility that the phone creates those desires in the first place." (17) In cyberspace, desire has no foothold in the abyss of the Other; instead, desire is formulated along preexisting pathways, designed experiences, programmed processes leading to predetermined outcomes. Returning to Fink above: the decentered subject of psychoanalysis is constituted through lack in the Other. The digital Big Other – the network, cyberspace – is not lacking. It has limits, but it is not inconsistent in the same way as the "traditional," virtual symbolic. There are no gaps; at least, none we can access.

3.3. Fantasy

3.3.1. The Formula of Fantasy

The implications of my above discussion of desire cannot be fully understood without also considering the role of fantasy. Fantasy, in Lacan, is what provides the

coordinates of our desire; Žižek elaborates by saying that fantasy “provides a ‘schema’ according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire.” (*Plague of Fantasies* 7) In other words, fantasy exists in the space between the individual subject and the object of their desire. Surrounded by desirable objects, the subject experiences fantasy as that which tells them to desire *this* object instead of *that*. Furthermore – and especially important for when we turn to anxiety below – fantasy functions as a “screen” that keeps the impossible object–cause of desire (*objet a*) at a distance by “staging” it within or beyond normal, everyday objects. As Andre Nusselder notes in *The Surface Effect*, fantasy thus serves the dual role of being both protective (against the over-proximity of the unrepresentable *a*) and also orienting us toward objects of desire.

The formula for fantasy – of the subject in tension and relation to the *a* – is formalized by Lacan as $\$ \diamond a$ (Fink 174). The *a* has been discussed at length so far, and the $\$$ is Lacan’s shorthand for the barred subject; that is, $\$$ stands for the subject as existing in the symbolic, subject to symbolic castration, thus lacking. The \diamond , which Lacan sometimes calls the “lozenge,” is what designates the gap between subject and object. Such is to say: if the formula for how fantasy functions is $\$ \diamond a$, fantasy as such lives in the \diamond . Without that space, without the differentiation and distance between subject and object, fantasy does not and cannot function. This “formula” of fantasy serves only to visualize that fantasy stages subject and object apart from one another. The \diamond – the gap – is exactly that. It is a gap, a break, a blank space between elements. That is to say, as Žižek does in *Plague of Fantasies*, there is no “universal matrix” of fantasy. Lacan is not proposing a specific formulaic relation between objects. Every subject is

made to invent their own private fantasy. This “private fantasy” is what is formulated when, as discussed above, the infant first encounters the impenetrable desire of the Other. The infant constructs a fantasy – a narrative – by which they can fulfill the Other’s desire, by which the infant’s lack and the Other’s lack can overlap and both can thus become whole. The problem is, of course, the Other’s desire is fundamentally impenetrable, unsolvable, and so is the infant’s. While the sought “completion,” or wholeness, is never fully encountered, fantasy nevertheless takes root as the subject’s private, individual orientation toward this impossible-real object of desire – the *a*. Fantasy can shift and grow along with the subject, but one fundamental characteristic remains: Fantasy depends on, and also maintains, the distance between (desiring) subject and (desired) object.

3.3.2. The Non-Relation

This impossibility of completely overlapping with the Other encountered by the infant – the lack of a “universal matrix” – means that there is no completely satisfying relation between subject and object. Žižek traces this feature of fantasy back to Lacan’s aphorism that “there is no sexual relation.” (Fink 104) This lack of sexual relation – or, in positive form, this sexual non-relation – is a central part of Lacan’s thought with significant implications for cyberspace. By “there is no sexual relation,” Lacan is of course not saying that people do not have sex. Rather, Lacan is arguing that there is no necessary, direct, wholly complementary relation between men and women. Bruce Fink, in *The Lacanian Subject*, likens this to viewing men as oscillating like a sine wave and women like a cosine wave. There may appear to be a correlation, but the two are not directly complementary. Rather, as Fink explains, men and women are each “defined separately with respect to a third term.” This gives psychoanalysis a strictly anti-dualistic

view of sex, where a complementary, direct, one-to-one relation between man and woman is impossible. The “third term” invoked by Fink is, of course, the *objet a*, the impossible real. In other words: if the typical view of sexual complementarity is $1 + 1$ (which equals 2), psychoanalysis insists instead that it must be $1 + 1 + a$; $1 + 1$ still equals 2, but it is $2 + a$. No matter how many partners are in a relationship, no matter the sex or gender of those partners, no matter the other compatibilities or similarities or any other factor, every relationship is always minimally distorted and disrupted by the *a*.

I want to reiterate my final point above – that this nonrelation extends beyond simply the sexual relation between men and women. Despite my using the reified categories “man” and “woman” above, psychoanalysis does *not* prescribe biological essentialism of sex or gender. Instead, Lacan’s formulae of masculine and feminine sexuation define sexual difference as tied to the individual subject’s entry to language. But fundamentally, the nonrelation applies to *all* subjects, of *all* sexes, of *all* genders and *all* orientations. There is no escaping the distorting power of the *objet a* in our relationships, the constant presence of an unnamed and unnamable “third term.” Much great psychoanalytic theory has been written on sexuation and the different functioning of masculine and feminine – among them Joan Copjec’s “Sex and the Euthanasia of Pure Reason” and Alenka Zupančič’s *What is Sex?* – but that is beyond the scope of the present project, and not here necessary to understand the weight of this distorting presence of the *a*.

In Zupančič’s *What is Sex?* invoked above, she lays out the theory of the nonrelation and the *a* as a direct counterargument against object-oriented ontology via Quentin Meillassoux. “Object-oriented” ontology takes its name from computer science –

as in, “object-oriented programming” – so its relevance to our current discussion is clear. Zupančič first agrees with Meillassoux in his criticism of correlationism – the post-Kantian insistence that it is the *relation* between thinking and being that is primary, and strict access to only one or the other is impossible. Rather, Meillassoux (and other object-oriented ontologists) rejects this primary of the correlation and relations between objects as a distortion of those objects themselves, and that those objects have real, noumenal existence beyond human perception. This is a simplified description, of course, but will serve our purposes here: for example, perhaps we can already see that this approach would reject the relations-centric view of software advocated by Chun discussed in Chapter 2. Zupančič, however, rejects both positions. As discussed above, psychoanalysis discards the possibility of a complementary relation between subject and object; thus, the rejection of the correlationist, relation-focused model is obvious. However, Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism is *also* flawed, because it does not account for the *objet a*.

Lacan describes the *objet a* with a word of his own invention: it is “extimate.” “Extimate” is a portmanteau of “exterior” and “intimate”; the *objet a* is at once deeply intimate to us and also external. Thus, my rough formula of the nonrelation as $1 + 1 + a$ is somewhat misleading; the a is not just a floating, exterior, third term. The a is also deeply intimate to the 1, it distorts the 1 from within. Perhaps a better formula to express the nonrelation would be $(1 + a) + (1 + a)$. Such is to say – and this is Zupančič’s critique of Meillassoux – object-oriented ontology misses the fact that the a , the nonrelation, always already distorts objects *from within*. What is primary in a psychoanalytic ontology is not relations between objects nor the objects themselves, but the gap that separates any object from itself. This is, as Zupančič rightly points out, the ultimate basis of dialectical

materialism; a materialism which prioritizes contradiction not simply between terms but within them. Zupančič proposes, then, that a truly psychoanalytic ontology would be an *object-disoriented ontology*, one that places front and center the distortion of the *objet a* and the implication of the non-relation.

Thus, we return to the problem of cyberspace. Taina Bucher's *If... Then* rightly describes how algorithms – at the basic level, an “If... Then:” statement in programming – serve to generate and organize relations between digital objects. Bucher sees algorithms as Foucauldian “technologies of power” and insists that the productive way to study algorithms is not to ask what they are but to examine what they do (49). Bucher writes that viewing algorithms as an impenetrable “black box” is flawed, and that instead what should be studied is “not necessarily the hidden content of the box but the very political and social practices that help sustain the notion of algorithms as black boxes.” (59) As a study of power and politics, Bucher's text is invaluable in the algorithm age; but, as I have criticized other Foucauldian approaches to cyberspace, her hastiness to move on from the “black box” of an algorithm is misguided. As with Wendy Hui Kyong Chun above, I agree entirely with the belief that simply unfolding the explicit text of the algorithm will reveal some hidden truth is flawed. But – as the very title of Bucher's book reveals – algorithms always follow a strictly logical, symbolic structure. For an algorithm to function, its input – the objects on or with which it operates – must be “computable,” as must its output (Bucher 9). What is occluded by the “black box” of the algorithm is not only the algorithm's structure but also those elements which are *excluded* from the algorithm's structure. The element excluded is, of course, the *objet a*, the uncomputable surplus. For an algorithm to function, it must *by definition* allow for a

computable relation between objects. Following Zupančič's definition of the non-relation above – that it is not simply *between* objects but *within* them – we can thus see clearly that being subject to the algorithmic, computable processes of cyberspace eliminates or occludes the possibility of the non-relation.

The non-relation – an object's distance from itself, the gap constitutive of subjectivity – is, in psychoanalysis, the ground for freedom and emancipation. As discussed above; theories of subjectivation occlude the blank space on which those processes and relations function. The danger of these theories of subjectivation is the loss of the subject itself, the loss of the subject's freedom, the loss of a space on which the subject gets a foothold and from which the subject can imagine a space beyond. Emphasizing algorithms and code as fundamentally relations and processes accomplishes the same thing; there is no room for an "outside," no space to experience absence. The natural complementarity of theories of subjectivation and the relation-centric theories of cyberspace should be clear, and perhaps points toward why the work of theorists like Michel Foucault, Giles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari are so popular when theorizing cyberspace (theorists Galloway, Chun, and Bucher discussed thus far all fall into this camp.) That is to say: what unites the work of these theorists is their shared rejection of the non-relation and negativity. These same features – the occlusion of absence and the *objet a* – are accomplished by the very function of cyberspace. Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari provide attractive – and not invalid! – lenses through which to study cyberspace because the basic structure of their thought *functionally mirrors the basic structure of cyberspace itself*.

3.3.3. From Conjunctive to Connective

To recap my earlier discussion of fantasy: fantasy, in the face of the lack of relation between objects (or the non-relation between the subject and themselves, as object), provides our orientation toward objects and thus “stages” our desire. Cyberspace, however, by its very structure *requires* that there be relations between objects. The distorting *a* is occluded and ejected from the normal function of cyberspace’s processes and relations. Now, obviously, fantasy and desire still function in cyberspace. What I propose is, however, that this forced emphasis on relations via cyberspace – the impossibility of the non-relation within cyberspace – fundamentally alters how fantasy functions. To theorize this, I will lift a few terms from the decidedly non-Lacanian activist and theorist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi who identifies a not entirely dissimilar phenomenon in his recent text *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Impossibility*. Bifo, in his consideration of digital networks (and in his debt to Deleuze & Guattari,) theorizes a shift toward what he calls the “neo-human” condition: “A shift from the conjunctive to the connective mode of concatenation.” (108) Bifo, unlike other theorists I have critiqued thus far, does not outright reject the linguistic model; by “conjunctive” and “connective” he is referring specifically to modes of language and processes of signification (and, thus, the subject’s constitution thereof). “Conjunctive” is defined as a mode where the *rules* of signification do not pre-exist the *act* of signification. In other words, the conjunctive mode emerges when there is no pre-ordained model or structure.

Contra the conjunctive mode and emerging in the wake of the proliferation of digital code, algorithms, and cyberspace technology, Bifo then introduces the

“connective” mode. The connective mode, writes Bifo, is a mode “in which bodies adapt to a code, to a digital format of exchange.” (109) Translating all of this into Lacanese: the “conjunctive” mode, where there is no pre-existing relation between elements, is the status of being in the face of the non-relation. Echoing Žižek again – there is no “universal matrix” for fantasy, there is no pre-existing ruleset for complementary relations between subjects and objects. The “connective” mode, then, is the mode emerging when the non-relation is occluded. Pre-existing relations between subjects and objects now *do* exist, in cyberspace. The emphasis on relation-focused theories of cyberspace demonstrate that cyberspace is fundamentally a connective medium; what matters is not the objects but the pathways between them. Even algorithms that are self-generated – so-called “machine learning” – are still more like self-constructing train tracks than genuine spontaneity. The subject is by definition separated from the object of their desire, and fantasy provides the coordinates for the subject to attain that object. Cyberspace’s connective mode impacts our relation to fantasy because it turns that open space, that \diamond , from a space of absence to a space crisscrossed by pre-existing pathways for the subject to obediently follow. What this accomplishes in the subject’s psyche is twofold: first, by following these preestablished pathways, the subject has much easier access to the objects of their desire; second, by the occlusion of negativity, the subject becomes more and more surrounded by positive, existing objects.

3.4. Anxiety

3.4.1. Removing the Space Between

The Lacanian subject is constituted through lack, meaning the Lacanian subject is fundamentally a desiring subject. Our subjectivity is molded by this sensation of the

missing primordial object, the object we only need to reclaim in order to again become whole. Desire thus orients the Lacanian subject toward an object; an object, once acquired, that does not provide that sensation of completeness. The subject thus passes from object to object, always failing to reclaim the original object, always motivated by the object-cause of desire, the *objet a*. Fantasy – $\$ \diamond a$ – provides the coordinates of our desire, maintains distance between subject and object, at once guiding us toward specific objects and protecting us from approaching too closely the unrepresentable *objet a*. If we follow this schema so far, the question should arise: what happens if the subject *does* get too close to the *objet a*? When the space between subject and object shrivels – when $\$ \diamond a$ becomes $\$a$ – the fantasy structure collapses. The distance that maintains our desire shrinks, and the unrepresentable *a* looms, overbearing, over present. This is what leads from desire to anxiety; and anxiety, it seems to me, is more in fashion now than it has ever been.

Below I will build from the insight and structure I worked through in the previous chapter to demonstrate that psychoanalysis gives us a uniquely powerful theoretical approach to understanding the immense proliferation of anxiety in the cyberspace age; first, I should define what I mean by “anxiety.” Is the anxiety of today the same as the nuclear anxiety of the Cold War? It may be tempting to say so – certainly recent global political circumstances are “anxiety-inducing,” to say the least – but I believe our 21st century anxiety is of a different breed. Anxiety during the Cold War for western subjects had a specific, unipolar axis in a way contemporary anxiety does not; while there was certainly vast amounts of paranoia, conspiracy, and delusion surrounding the real magnitude of the Soviet nuclear threat at the peak of the Cold War, western subjects at

least *experienced* their anxiety as being rooted in a single figure. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the deflation of the Cold War, western subjects could no longer even have the fantasy of a single anxiety-inducing enemy or threat. Filmmaker Adam Curtis approaches this topic in his documentary *HyperNormalisation* (2016), where he demonstrates conscious efforts by the U.S. government and media to “construct” new villains for western subjects to fear; Curtis understands that anxiety is easier to cope with when you can pin it on something specific. The problem, then, is that none of these new villains – Saddam Hussein, Moammar Qaddafi, Kim-Jong Un, Nicolás Maduro, and so on – can alone sustain the west’s anxiety in the same way that the Cold War once did.

But hold on – does not Freud, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, state clearly that anxiety does not have an object (100)? Anxiety – *angst* – in Freud is always linked to expectation of something; but crucially, the “something” we are anxious of is left indeterminate. When anxiety has a distinct and clear object, Freud insists on the term “fear.” Thus, the “nuclear anxiety” above is – if we are accepting Freud’s definition, which for now we are – more aptly labeled “nuclear fear.” At first glance, Freud’s definition seems a little contradictory. How can anxiety be “about something,” but also have no object? Lacan seeks to answer that question in his *Seminar X: Anxiety*, where he offers a greatly expanded theory of anxiety, but it’s my impression that Lacan’s definition of anxiety remains a minority position. I will return to this passage from Freud’s to Lacan’s anxiety below, and demonstrate its connection to cyberspace, but first we need to take a detour through Heidegger.

3.4.2. A Detour Through Heidegger

Freud's *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* was published in 1926; three years later, in 1929, Martin Heidegger would give his lecture "What is Metaphysics?" where he laid out his philosophical understanding of anxiety. It should be noted that some translations (such as Walter Kaufman's in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*) of "What is Metaphysics?" translate Heidegger's use of *Angst* as "dread" and not "anxiety," with "anxiety" being used to translate *Aengstlichkeit*. Fully detailing the implications of this translation decision is beyond the scope of this paper; to be clear, in the Standard Edition translation of *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, James Strachey translates *Angst* as "anxiety." Despite the differing translations, both Freud and Heidegger are talking about *Angst*, which I will continue referring to as "anxiety."

Heidegger's goal in "What is Metaphysics?" is to investigate the implications of Nothing (proper noun intentional) on being; the interlocking of Nothing with *Da-sein* (Heidegger's key term for Being as such, the experience of Being-in-the-world). Heidegger claims that anxiety – *Angst* – is that indefinite affect we experience when face-to-face with Nothing. Heidegger's definition of anxiety is not entirely dissimilar to Freud's; furthermore, the two share a definition of "fear," which they both insist has a definite object. That fear must have a definite object is, for Heidegger, the limitation of fear. Fear is always "fear of," where anxiety is always "anxiety about." Heidegger continues: "The indefiniteness of *what* we dread (*Angst*) is not just lack of definition: it represents the essential impossibility of defining the 'what.'" (248–249) Experiencing anxiety, in Heidegger, is to be overwhelmed with this Nothing; it is not a definite thing, it is not an object, it is instead the experience of Nothing as such. Heidegger sees anxiety

thus as serving an essential function in understanding *Da-sein*, as it is only through anxiety that Nothing as such can be comprehended. When everything falls away, and we are only left with Nothing, one is finally left to experience pure being – *Da-sein*.

This Heideggerian – thus existentialist – definition of anxiety is perhaps the most influential *philosophical* definition of anxiety. Even on a basic, instinctual level, our differing experiences of fear and anxiety might serve to demonstrate this: the idea that “fear” is in response to a definite object where “anxiety” is more indefinite, more of a miasma, certainly strikes me as an accepted and acceptable everyday definition. Of course – if there is one thing Lacan had little use for, it was “accepted and acceptable everyday definitions.” As I will demonstrate below, Lacan takes this theory of anxiety inherited from Freud and Heidegger and, by making one relatively minor adjustment, completely inverts our understanding of anxiety. It is Lacan’s definition that we must adhere to if we are to understand the connection between cyberspace and anxiety.

3.4.3. Anxiety is Not Without an Object

Lacan’s definition of anxiety – as laid out in his 1962-1963 *Seminar X: Anxiety* – is not so much a refutation or rebuttal of Freud or Heidegger but a change of perspective. The fundamental difference lies in Lacan’s assertion that anxiety *does* have an object: the object of anxiety is the *objet a*. Rather, as Lacan puts it, it is not that anxiety has a definite object, but that anxiety is *not without* an object (89). This object which anxiety is not without is the *objet a*; as discussed above, anxiety emerges when the fantasy structure collapses, and the subject is placed in over proximity with the unrepresentable *a*. Thus, we see the inversion from Heidegger to Lacan: where Heidegger saw anxiety as a space without objects entirely, where the subject has no objects left to hold on to, Lacan rejects

the idea that a subject can be without a corresponding object. It is not that anxiety's object is indefinite, as in Heidegger and Freud, but that anxiety's object is itself *objectified indefiniteness*. The homology between fear and anxiety then becomes that fear emerges as a response to ordinary, everyday, definite objects where anxiety emerges as a response to a special object, the *objet a*, which is the presupposed object-embodiment of nothingness.

It is possible to here notice a subtle contradiction with the theory of cyberspace I have been pursuing thus far. Has my argument thus far not been that the *objet a* – absence as such – is in fact *occluded* from cyberspace? How can this anxiety-inducing *objet a* then become overly proximate to the cyberspace subject, if the very technology of cyberspace precludes the *objet a* from emerging at all? To answer this, I return to Lacan's portmanteau describing the *objet a* as “extimate,” “exterior” and “intimate.” By this, Lacan means that the *objet a* is intimate to the subject – in the sense that it is of the utmost importance to the subject – and yet is necessarily also excluded from our subjectivity as such. The *objet a* needs to be excluded for our subjectivity to function at all, but this core importance of the *objet a* simultaneously means that there is nothing more central to subjectivity than this excluded, external *objet a*. The *objet a* is thus properly *Unheimlich*, uncanny, in the properly Freudian sense; the *objet a* is that which is undoubtedly *within me* but is at once undoubtedly *not me*. This is the encounter with anxiety against which fantasy defends. Fantasy stages the *objet a* beyond the subject in a succession of everyday objects so that it may be kept at a distance.

Fantasy seeks to place the *objet a* in those miniscule, unrepresentable features, things, behaviors that we find in external reality. Lacan, in his (unpublished and officially

untranslated) *Seminar XIII: L'objet de la psychanalyse* provides the classic example of the *objet a* in the turned-away canvas of Velázquez's "Las Meninas," the perceived blind spot in the visual field, but our encounters with the *objet a* can take many forms. Perhaps your loved one's eyes squint when they smile, or perhaps they tuck their hair behind their ear in a specific way when they're feeling flustered. Maybe it's the way the precision-engineered box of your new iPhone fits together in that airtight, almost mechanical way. I, for example, can only seriously get any writing done when I am using my mechanical keyboard – a hefty, steel piece of equipment that *clacks* very loudly when pressing any key. Attempting to write on a slim laptop or using another keyboard means I don't have those audible, mechanical *clacks* when typing, and it just doesn't *feel* right. Such is all to say: fantasy "hooks" the *objet a* onto these unrepresentable moments and features, these little gaps and breaks in the symbolic, and orients our desire and thus our subjectivity toward them.

Cyberspace, by *occluding* these gaps and breaks in the symbolic and replacing our usual open, conjunctive mode of fantasy with the closed, predetermined connective mode of fantasy, thus greatly limits the power of fantasy to displace that *a*. Such is to say: if our desire is successfully channeled down one of these preexisting paths, our cyberspace experience feels more or less fine. An algorithm pushes products in our direction that capture our desire just fine, or we meet someone new because Twitter notified us that they liked one of our posts. These experiences may be different than their non-cyberspace counterparts, but they are not fundamentally lesser. What these cyberspace experiences of desire are, however, are predetermined by the right-angle connective fantasy; fantasy hooks the *a* onto *that* object or *that* person because that connective path was opened to us

in that moment. Furthermore, just because we desire something in the connective mode of cyberspace fantasy does not mean that our desire will carry over outside of cyberspace. Ask anyone familiar with online dating how many times they've had great conversational chemistry with someone on Tinder only for it to fizzle within microseconds on a first date; consider how many times you've purchased a desired object from Amazon only for it to arrive and to be substantially less than what you expected. This is more than simply desire fading upon acquiring an object, this is the object acquired being wholly different from its counterpart in cyberspace because the very function of our desire-staging fantasy is different.

Cyberspace can point us toward objects of desire – indeed, it seems a growing majority of the internet is advertisements – but ultimately cyberspace is *not lacking*. And, because cyberspace is not lacking, it becomes immensely more difficult for fantasy to “hook” that *objet a* onto an external object. Theorist Mark Fisher, in his essay “The Slow Cancellation of the Future,” intones gravely that “In conditions of digital recall, loss is itself lost.” (2) The fundamental problem of cyberspace is not that it is a hollow, empty imitation of external reality but rather that cyberspace is overflowing with presence. And, when faced with too much presence, when faced with no unrepresentable “blind spot” on which to hook the *objet a*, fantasy crumbles. The subject is then left face-to-face with the anxiety-inducing *objet a*. In other words: cyberspace, by virtue of its necessary symbolic consistency and resulting fullness, does not provide the open space necessary for our fantasy to function in the way it should. Rejected by cyberspace's fullness, the subject is left unable to escape from that extimate, uncanny, *objet a*.

3.4.4. Life in the *Unheimlich* Valley

The *Unheimlich* – the uncanny – is Freud’s designation for an encounter with that which is at once *like me* or *in me* but is simultaneously *not me*. Doppelgängers, doubles, ghosts, and so on serve as classic literary and filmic examples of the uncanny; in the age of cyberspace, we have “the uncanny valley.” The uncanny valley is a term designating the supposed gap between something computer-generated and something real. For example: 3D models of humans, computer-generated voices, interactive AI, and so on. The term “valley” is meant to evoke the notion that it is a gap to be surmounted; that this problem can be solved, that there can and will be no perceptual difference between something created by a computer and something existing outside cyberspace. The only thing needed is *more* power, *more* coding, *more* complicated models – more, more, more. Viewing the uncanny this way – that it is a matter of technology not yet able to fully replicate human behavior – misses the point entirely. Slavoj Žižek writes in *Sex and the Failed Absolute*: “The problem is not, ‘Can a computer do X?’ but: Can it *fail* to do X in the right way, so that its failure evokes the contours of what they fail to touch?” (170) The experience of the uncanny valley is not, contrary to its common definition, the experience of technology’s failure to properly emulate human behavior; the uncanny valley is precisely the experience of technology’s failure *to fail*.

Our most authentic, revealing moments with technology are moments of its genuine failure. We are reminded that our laptop is just a stupid machine when it crashes mid-report; we are reminded our phone is just a piece of glass when the screen is cracked. Though these moments of malfunction can definitely result in frustration or even fear, it is no longer that ambient miasma of anxiety. Encountering genuine failure in cyberspace

gives us respite from anxiety; finally, at long last, the machine is revealed as just a machine.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

4.1. Beyond the Pleasure Principle

4.1.1. Everything, All of the Time

Comedian, musician, filmmaker, and erstwhile YouTube star Bo Burnham created and released on Netflix a sort of digital one-man show (*Inside*) spurred on by the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. One song from this show, "Welcome to the Internet," is a darkly comic, frenetic, carnival barker-esque ode to overwhelming stream of information one experiences in any amount of time in cyberspace. The chorus for "Welcome to the Internet" goes as follows:

Can I interest you in everything, all of the time?

A little bit of everything, all of the time?

Apathy's a tragedy, boredom is a crime,

Anything and everything, all of the time!

Can one imagine a better description of the digital than "everything, all of the time?" There is no nothing in cyberspace – there are only more somethings. As Burnham recognizes, apathy and boredom – both fundamentally negative affects, emphasizing absence – are shunned from the digital. More than shunned; as Burnham notes here, being bored is simply not allowed. To be bored is to be unplugged, to be removed from cyberspace's ceaseless flow of processes. Overexposure to cyberspace makes boredom unthinkable and unbearable.

Mark Fisher noticed this retreat from boredom in his students, and wrote on it in his 2009 text *Capitalist Realism: What is to be Done?* In Fisher's eye, boredom was to be

“removed from the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix” of cyberspace; to be “denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand.” (24) What Fisher is pointing to here is how cyberspace itself combats its inherent tendency toward inducing anxiety by simply providing its users an uninterrupted stream of enjoyable content to be consumed, algorithm-designed to be something similar to other things cyberspace has “remembered” that we enjoyed. This process results, among other things, in the “filter bubble,” wherein social media users are “trapped” in content “bubbles” that prevent them from easily accessing content or perspectives which social media algorithms have “decided” are not aligned with that user’s interests or views (Bucher 121–122). As the flow of information grows and its speed increases, the cyberspace subject’s experience of any sort of friction at all decreases; as algorithms grow in complexity and we entrust our devices with knowing what we desire, the prescribed connective structure of fantasy takes firmer hold. Thus, as in Lacan’s aphorism, desire is still the desire of the other – but in cyberspace, desire is now the desire of the algorithm.

The glassy-eyed consumption noticed by Fisher in his students becomes what Fisher labels “depressive hedonia.” Depression is usually characterized by anhedonia, but what Fisher sees in his students is instead “a complete inability to do anything *except* pursue pleasure;” that they are unable to escape the pleasure principle. Fisher writes of this state, “There is a sense that ‘something is missing’ – but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed *beyond* the pleasure principle.” (22) Fisher’s winking invocation of Freud is not elaborated upon in *Capitalist Realism*, so I will take the initiative myself.

4.1.2. From Boredom to Dancing

I have thus far sought to present an unapologetically psychoanalytic theory of cyberspace emphasizing cyberspace's relationship to negativity. To fully understand the psychoanalytic intervention on cyberspace, it was necessary to go back to square one, as it were; only by rethinking the structure of Lacan's three orders could we see the unique status of that central psychoanalytic object, the *objet a*. Once understanding cyberspace entails the subject in a fundamentally different relationship to the *objet a*, to absence as such, it was necessary to work through the triple movement of desire, fantasy, and anxiety. It is with anxiety that the full ramifications of this procedure are made clear: cyberspace, as a field of relentless positivity and symbolic consistency, is overwhelming with fullness. The *objet a* has no lack on which to rest, resulting in its being unable to separate from the subject; thus, we see anxiety as the signal to the true nature of cyberspace. I will now attempt to offer what psychoanalysis could offer as a path beyond cyberspace, a path aiming beyond its excessive fullness; that is, beyond the pleasure principle.

Anxiety and pleasure-seeking are the alternating modes of cyberspace, each a different response to cyberspace's overwhelming fullness. Against fullness, we must instead posit *emptiness*; against anxiety, we should posit boredom. Byung-Chul Han, in his text *The Burnout Society*, advocates for the potential of boredom – or, rather, advocates for boredom *as* a position of potentiality. Han details the passage from walking to running to dancing: when a person walks for a great period of time, they may grow bored of walking, and may grow restless and seek variation in their movement. Running is not a variation of walking, only an acceleration; dancing, however, “represents a

luxury.” (13–14) It is only by recognizing boredom in the act of walking that dancing – something new, something different – can emerge. The clarion call of the digital age is *more, faster!* and it is amplified by the very structure of cyberspace itself. That is to say, when we begin to feel bored with cyberspace, it only gives us the option to run. We are not allowed the space necessary to dance.

Further in *The Burnout Society*, Han details what he sees as the critical departure from *vita contemplativa* to *vita activa*. The very technology by which we communicate and interact with each other simply does not allow for the open space necessary for contemplation; contemplation, that is, arising from boredom. Han insists that *vita contemplativa* is not simply a state of passive affirmation and go-with-the-flow openness. Rather, insisting on *vita contemplativa* means being resistant to the constant onslaught of intrusive stimuli. Indeed, it is by surrendering to *vita activa* – that is, following every impulse, reacting to every stimulus, heeding the omnipresent call to *do something* – that we become genuinely passive. (21–22) The false correlation of activity with freedom seems to echo the observations made by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: work will set us free; we will be measured against our good works; time is money and money is everything and thus any time wasted is irrevocably lost.

Han calls it “burnout,” Fisher calls it “depressive hedonia,” psychoanalysis calls it “anxiety.” These three terms carry each different connotations but emerge from the same general recognition. It is not that contemporary life filtered as it is through digital technology is somehow lesser, hollow, or lacking; rather, we are strained by contemporary life’s very *excessive fullness*. As I have sought to demonstrate here, this fullness is – to use the parlance of computer enthusiasts – “a feature, not a bug.” The

occlusion of negativity, the removal of empty space so essential for contemplation, is not an unfortunate side effect of digital technology and cyberspace but rather a necessary precondition to its existence. Cyberspace, constructed as it is by unfathomably complex symbolic matrices and trillions of lines of code, can only encounter that negativity in moments of failure. When cyberspace is working as intended, it by definition and by function does not and cannot provide even a moment of breathing room. The question then becomes: how do we move beyond this? Digital technology is not going anywhere; advocating mass withdrawal from cyberspace is simply not a viable solution, especially considering the many benefits digital technology can and often does provide. Furthermore, simply demanding passivity and withdrawal would be a cop-out. When not acting is not an option, but the only acts we can fathom are those predetermined by cyberspace's connective fantasy structure and set pathways, where is the path out?

4.1.3. Is Bartleby Online?

If we are to loosen the hold that excessive positivity has on our collective subjectivities, to reclaim *vita contemplativa*, we must re-assert a space for negativity. Han, in *The Burnout Society*, provides the terminology of “positive potency” and “negative potency.” Positive potency is the power to act; negative potency is the power *not* to act. (24) Han is careful to note that this negative potency is not simply impotence. Rather, Han situates negative potency in the decidedly Hegelian *assertion of a negative*. The classic case of asserting negativity is without a doubt Melville's Bartleby – *I would prefer not to*.

The thinkers who have invoked Bartleby are too numerous to list definitively. Giles Deleuze, in “Bartleby; or, The Formula,” notes how grammatically the “abrupt

termination” of “I would prefer not to” serves as a “kind of limit-function,” is “ravaging, devastating, and leaves nothing standing in its wake.” Giorgio Agamben, in “Bartleby, or On Contingency” writes that Bartleby – the scribe who has stopped writing – is “the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives,” (253) and thus an embodiment of Nothing’s “pure, absolute potentiality.” Byung-Chul Han, however, though his elevation of negative potency brought us to this point, discards Bartleby as a figure of apathy and the lack of drive; Han charges Agamben’s “ontotheological” reading of Bartleby with missing the point, that Bartleby is “without a world,” is “absent and pathetic.” (26–27) Slavoj Žižek, often photographed wearing a black t-shirt with the words “I WOULD PREFER NOT TO” emblazoned in white, provides in *The Parallax View* what I consider the most relevant reading of Bartleby for our current purposes. Žižek writes – contra Agamben, and somewhat contra Han – that Bartleby should *not* be viewed merely as potentiality, as a starting point, as a theoretical “clearing the table” before the creation of a new order. Rather, Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” must be “the very source and background of this [new] order, its permanent foundation.” Han’s distinction above between impotence and negative potency must be kept in mind; “I would prefer not to” is not to be employed in some kind of Beautiful Soul withdrawal from any action at all whatsoever. Rather, as Žižek notes, the true emancipatory act is that act which *embodies* the negativity of Bartleby’s assertion.

Responding to Han’s claim that Bartleby is a figure of apathy, Žižek may very well agree that Bartleby himself is no revolutionary ideal; but only because Bartleby was not living up to the standards of Bartleby’s very pronouncement! “I would prefer not to” cannot simply be an impotent, passive withdrawal from activity. Rather, actions must be

taken which *embody* “I would prefer not to” as such. If we are to learn from Bartleby, we must – inverting a label once applied to former President Donald Trump – take him *literally* but not *seriously*. Bartleby as an individual *is* a passive, apathetic figure; he accomplishes nothing and then dies. To take Bartleby “literally but not seriously” is to recognize this and instead look for what was *in* Bartleby that was *more* than Bartleby. We do not need to *say*, “I would prefer not to,” we need to *act* “I would prefer not to.”

Fully exploring the ramifications of the above is beyond the scope of this paper, but it has important implications for closing out this psychoanalytic theory of cyberspace. Han insists that Bartleby is a figure without drive; to the contrary, I believe Bartleby is a figure *of* drive. “Drive,” of course, being that which Freud situates beyond the pleasure principle. The pleasure principle, as outlined above, is utterly dominant in cyberspace; it keeps its subjects in a feedback loop between anxiety and pleasure-seeking, with cyberspace’s closed, predetermined pathways and designed traps for desire making it almost impossible to even think beyond its bounds. Of course, cyberspace is still never able to live up to its own promises; the object of our desire being digital does not change the fact that once we attain it, our desire for it rapidly shrinks. Our response to cyberspace must be twofold. First, the anxiety we experience when faced with its excessive fullness is a signal of cyberspace’s inadequacy for sustaining subjectivity. As above: this anxiety is a *feature*, not a bug, and cannot be mitigated. Rather, anxiety is a signal for the subject to seek their own space, to see cyberspace for what it is: a blind machine, overfilled with data; a means to an end, a tool, and not – as some Silicon Valley techno-evangelists would have you believe – an alternate mode of being, a Singularity awaiting the full digitization of consciousness. Second, it is Bartleby we must keep in mind when the

pleasure principle calls. The pleasure principle offers a succession of objects, all proclaiming to fulfill our desire, but none of which do. Rather than succumb to the depressive hedonia of obsessively attempting to fulfill the pleasure principle, our actions must be oriented toward the very impossibility of fulfilling desire.

To put it all together: cyberspace, by design, is overly full and occludes negativity. To prevent users from being so overwhelmed with anxiety that they avoid cyberspace altogether, cyberspace attaches to the pleasure principle and keeps its users in a constant state of pleasure-seeking. Simultaneously, the objects attained in that ceaseless pleasure-seeking never totally fulfill our desire. Thus, in an act of telling cyberspace's pleasure principle that we *would prefer not to*, we must emphasize the impossibility of its fulfillment. By doing so, by orienting our actions toward the unavoidable failure for desire to fulfill itself, we can clear space for that essential, freeing negativity in our interactions with cyberspace. Only psychoanalysis understands the full radicality of negativity's centrality to the subject; it is not that there is a core of absence at the heart of the subject, but *the subject itself embodies absence*. The subject *is* the gap in the symbolic, and by taking up Bartleby, saying *I would prefer not to* against the pleasure principle, accepting our role as this embodied negativity, we can carry that freedom to our interactions with cyberspace. Such is to say: cyberspace is horrifyingly over-present, and any absence we find there is the product of designed desire, connective fantasy, and other structures which preclude freedom; but the subject of the drive, the subject which does not seek fulfillment of its desire but rather embodies the very impossibility of that fulfillment, carries with them their *own* negativity. The subject *is* cyberspace's negativity and must take that negativity onto themselves.

A key insight of psychoanalysis is into the dominant, superego injunction of contemporary consumer capitalist society – “Enjoy!” Slavoj Žižek, in advocating for the efficacy of psychoanalysis as a discourse and theoretical framework, claims that it is only psychoanalysis which gives us permission to *not* enjoy. Cyberspace, hand-in-hand with neoliberal capitalism, is the space of enjoyment *par excellence*. Thus, the insights provided by psychoanalysis are crucial for any theory of cyberspace. It is not enough to simply advocate a return to pre-digital life – which is today impossible – nor is it enough to simply allow our relationships with cyberspace to continue unaltered. To reorient our stance toward cyberspace, we need the strength of psychoanalysis to reject its call of *more enjoyment, faster enjoyment*. Only by embracing the drive, by embracing our status not merely as subjects-of-lack but lack-as-subjects, can we maintain an appropriate distance to the machine.

WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. "Bartleby, or On Contingency." *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 243–71.
- Berardi, Franco "Bifo." *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. Verso, 2017.
- Bown, Alfie. *The PlayStation Dreamworld*. Polity, 2018.
- Bucher, Taina. *If... Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Burnham, Bo. *Bo Burnham: Inside*. Netflix, 2021.
- Chaplin, Charlie. *Modern Times*. United Artists, 1936.
- Copjec, Joan. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Verso, 2015.
- Curtis, Adam. *HyperNormalisation*. BBC, 2016.
- Deleuze, Gilles. "Bartleby; or, The Formula." *Essays Critical and Clinical*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 68–90.
- Fink, Bruce. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zer0 Books, 2009.
- . "The Slow Cancellation of the Future." *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures*, Zer0 Books, 2014, pp. 2–30.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. W. W. Norton and Company, 1961.
- . *Civilization and Its Discontents*. W. W. Norton and Company, 2010.
- . *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*. W. W. Norton and Company, 1959.
- . "The 'Uncanny.'" <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>.
- Galloway, Alexander R. *Uncomputable: Play and Politics in the Long Digital Age*. Verso, 2021.
- Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. Stanford Briefs, 2015.
- Heidegger, Martin. "What Is Metaphysics?" *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, edited by Walter Kaufmann, Plume, 1975, pp. 242–65.

Hui Kyong Chun, Wendy. *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*. The MIT Press, 2011.

Lacan, Jacques. *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book X*. Polity, 2016.

---. *L'objet de La Psychanalyse: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XIII*. https://nosubject.com/Seminar_XIII.

---. *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II*. W. W. Norton and Company, 1988.

---. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*. W. W. Norton and Company, 1998.

---. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalysis." *Écrits*, W. W. Norton and Company, 2006, pp. 75–82.

---. "The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956." *Écrits*, W. W. Norton and Company, 2006, pp. 384–412.

Nusselder, André. *The Surface Effect: The Screen of Fantasy in Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 2013.

The Legend of Zelda: The Breath of the Wild. Nintendo Switch, Nintendo, 2017.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1995.

Wachowski, Lana, and Lilly Wachowski. *The Matrix*. Warner Bros, 1999.

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge, 1992.

Žižek, Slavoj. *How To Read Lacan*. W. W. Norton and Company, 2006.

---. *Sex and the Failed Absolute*. Bloomsbury, 2020.

---. *The Parallax View*. The MIT Press, 2009.

---. *The Plague of Fantasies*. Verso, 2008.

---. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso, 2008.

Zupančič, Alenka. *What Is Sex?* The MIT Press, 2017.