

# Cyber-psyche as Possessed by the Virtual Spectacle

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The spectator's consciousness, imprisoned in a flattened universe, bound by the screen of the spectacle behind which his life has been deported, knows only the *fictional speakers* who unilaterally surround him with... the politics of their commodities.... Here the stage is set with the false exit of generalized autism.

--Guy Debord The Society of the Spectacle, section 218.

Informentality I will define as the belief that information is the most obvious, necessary, buyable unit, and a kind of ultimate good; that information precedes action--not logically, but morally. (Or, that knowledge has exchange value but not use value.) It is primarily an economic dogma transformed into a natural faith for the postindustrial subject.<sup>1</sup> One can speak of informentality as a consciousness prepared only to succeed in cyberspace. Informentality has as its object of desire--not any bit of information--but a flow of "Information," more and newer and faster.

Freud somewhere justifies the heuristic power of interpreting the normal through the pathological by resorting to

an analogy with a crystal. A crystalline structure only becomes visible when it is cracked. Often the stressed extremity suddenly reveals its underlying structure. At the perverse end of informativity, we find several species. For example, the Internet as archive of the present has also brought out into the light of cyberspace an entire cast of micro-obsessives. Suddenly they are coming out of the woodwork by the thousands, like swarms of existential para-sites turned up from the rotting underside of postindustrial civilization. Web sites devoted to any obscure object have been constructed by fanatical researchers of the bizarre and the mundane. But their researches are relatively naïve and not reflexive. Typically, they focus zealously on one minuscule object out of the vast monolithic mediascape. For example, one man spends about six hours every week typing up and posting on the Internet his detailed descriptions of the television evening soap opera for teens, "Beverly Hills 90210." His focus on the ephemeral but deliberate costumes and gestures shows an attention that is somehow both appreciative and outraged:

...So then we are back at the Clare/Donna/Kelly Compound, and Tara and Kelly are in the kitchen making breakfast, and Tara is making coffee and asking whether she can have some of Clare's juice, and Kelly is all, "pour me some too" and that finishes off the juice. Tara is all reassuring her that "we all share around here," and then the door opens, and all of a sudden we are watching a 1950s horror movie because Vampiria is walking in the door—NO WAIT! It's Clare, wearing an atrociously horrendous chartreuse blouse over a bright orange T-shirt with pegged black pants and Romanesque wrap-up sandals and carrying a vermilion pleather bag, and with her is Donna, equally horrifying in a too short long-sleeved almost-shiny gray and white-stripped sweaterish thing over a cut-off T-shirt and gray camel-toe

hiphugger pants and vinyl white sandals and a sad, sad macramé bag and big old metal barrettes in her hair. Clare is all wanting some juice only there isn't any and she is all, "No juice?" and Tara is all, "I'm so sorry, I'll replace it," and Kelly is all, "Here, have mine," and Clare is all storming off making this "whatever" face, and Kelly is all, "What is her problem, it's only juice," and Donna is all, "Yeah, well, I used the last of her hair conditioner this morning," and someone should probably clue Donna in to the fact that you're supposed to RINSE OUT hair conditioner...<sup>ii</sup>

But the text of his transcription is obsessive in its detail and obsessive in its seemingly frustrated inability to stop watching. I will return to this peculiar ambivalence, this combination of hostility and attraction in the discussion below about Freud's analysis of fetishism. If each episode requires six hours of documentation time, then we should expect to find a close reading--which in a sense we find, though not the sort of close reading we have come to know in literature. Instead we get an immanent paraphrase with objections as asides. There is neither analysis nor real appreciation, but only obsession. (Though of course this does not prevent him from attracting more readers than any work of literary criticism anywhere.) The scale of focus is characteristically as restricted as it is hypnotically unswerving. Every gesture, prop, and phrase is rendered. In other examples of this genre, the spectator seems indistinguishable from the media object itself. Consider that one "painstakingly crafted home page devoted to the 1970s Hanna-Barbera cartoon Johnny Quest, provides plot summaries, and still frames of every Johnny Quest episode ever made."<sup>iii</sup> Such pop scholarship might be seen as a parody of academic scholarship, since it follows the principles of accuracy and completeness, yet it neglects any sense of contextualization,

emplacement in relation to adjacent texts either diachronically or synchronically, evaluation (the media object is merely assumed to be "the best" without any evaluative process), edification, critique, or analysis. Instead we find a regressed sensibility of narcissistic isolation. Such websites are often mistaken to be the "official" source put out by the producers; and difficulty This principle of scale applies not just to web sites but also to online discussions. Newsgroups are started about the smallest level of media-inspired obsession. There are at least 11, 000 newsgroups to date, and many of the "alt.etc." newsgroups would suffice to illustrate my claims:

- alt.shared-reality.x-files
- alt.autos.macho-trucks
- alt.binaries.pictures.erotic.centerfolds
- alt.comics.batman
- alt.drinks.kool-aid
- alt.fan.keanu-reeves
- alt.fan.letterman.guests.female
- alt.food.taco-bell
- alt.games.video.sony-playstation
- alt.music.beastie-boys
- alt.sports.football.pro.houston-oilers
- alt.startrek.creative.erotica
- alt.tv.melrose-place
- alt.barney.dinosaur.die.die.die.

The only academic discussion about this realm is found in the "discourse of fandom" within Cultural Studies circles, especially around the work of Fiske, Jenkins, Jenson, and Grossberg (Storey 123-131). My interpretation of micro-obsessive fans today is at odds with this tendency in Cultural Studies to find something genuine, productive, or resistant within the discourse of fandom. I return here to the kind of pathologizing of fans that Jenson decried in her summary of prior criticism of popular fandom (Storey 124). I do so after some careful consideration over the past few years, amid untold hours of

introspection, revealing chats with students, and reading the kinds of examples given in the present paper. It seems to me to be irresponsible to write as though everything is as it should be in the best possible mediated world. It isn't.

Instead of those supposed productive proletarians and subalterns engaging tactics of resistance and reappropriation through their fandom, I see nearly the opposite: the older notions of false consciousness and repressive desublimation; of distorted cognition, malaise, and a new "postmodern" loss of reference. I see the triumph of ideology or the dominant spectacle. The typical micro-obsessive deploys for the most part perverse tactics of deforming mass media items by obsessively burrowing through them for interminable factoids, kitschy urban folklore, lurid rumors and rare unknown related trivia. Within each burrow, there is no panopticon--neither as desire nor as fear. There is not even a panorama. But there is a kind of micropticon. A microscopic focus is applied; there is no telescopic reach to the macro level. Instead, it is an interminable unfolding of hidden minutiae. Each new factoid raises the power of microscopic fascination for the fragment, but does not attain an overview of the whole. In other words, a partial symptom here of what Jameson sees as "our inability at present to map the totality of social relations" under the emerging regime of transnational capitalism.

The operating principle of micro-obsessives seems to be: the more trivial, the more surreal. It is the quality of obsessive fascination aimed at the least important trivia that creates a sense of the surreal. The jolting juxtaposition is no longer between disparate elements within the space of an art work, but rather between the very object and the subject's focus of attention. That disparity is the juxtaposition that gives rise to this neo-surrealism.<sup>iv</sup> It is "camp" to the third degree. But any ironic distance is collapsed by the new intensity of a devotional monomania, a fall from aesthetics into a realm of neurotic transference, projection, and idolatry. We see an increase in the popularity of obsessive immersion with the mass

mediated object, one that captures the imagination, yet dominates it with a repetition-compulsion. Movie-goers attend sci-fi films costumed as their favorite character and boast of having seen the re-released Star Wars trilogy repeatedly, fifty times, even two hundred times.<sup>v</sup> Aside from this repetition which seems to seek some satisfaction that it does not find, fans of some particular media object, like the "Trekkies" who imitate Star Trek at annual conventions, adopt an entire subcultural ensemble— dialect, dress, hobbies, references, games— entirely enclosed by the parameters of a television series. What then shall we call this now?

Does the advent of the Internet create micro-obsessions overnight as it were—or were these micro-obsessions always around, waiting for an accessible platform? It is the light of cyberspace that gives micro-obsessives a new visibility, a new accessibility. But it was the condition of mass media that had already made possible this obscene tactic. Baudrillard suggested the beginnings of this trend some fifteen years ago in his description of a new phase of the spectacle that has insinuated itself on the current screen, "like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive..." (130-131). In "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard argued that this all supersedes the spectacle, leaves it behind. (It is Debord he hopes to compete with for attention here.) "...the spectacle is never obscene." "We are no longer a part of the drama of alienation." Yet this is a misreading of "alienation" as though it were existential and felt, rather than a marxist and not necessarily felt.<sup>vi</sup> Even today, consumers (and consumers of media) are alienated from the means of production, a fact that Baudrillard obscures. He argues that the obscene ecstasy of communication has collapsed the distinction between subject and object (hence alienation would be meaningless). But this collapse is precisely the ultimate success of the Debordian spectacle, not its obsolescence. For it is a collapse into the image. We should not at all be

surprised that those who were educated by the monologue of the spectacle would only be able to speak its language when the new media technology of digital networks allowed them to talk back. Dialogue, therefore, can still be dominated by the monolithic one-way traffic of mass media. The apparent "openness" of postmodern communications can also be a symptom of the exteriorization of an prior promiscuity and incitement stemming from the commodification of the imaginary.

For Baudrillard, then, this is a new kind of obscenity, a "cold" form unlike the older "hot" obscenity—a distinction that directly echoes McLuhan's between the cold and hot forms of media. There is no longer any sensibility of the private, repressed, and carnal of yore. For the new obscenity, "the promiscuity that reigns over the communication networks is one of superficial saturation, of an incessant solicitation, of an extermination of interstitial and protective spaces" (131). Within this superficial saturation of ecstatic communication networks, within this "transparent society," a new breed of micro-obsessives have dared to practice their tactic of the micropticon—in inverse proportion to the dare offered by the spectacle. Given the scene, they create the ob-scene. And given the obscene, they create a microscene.

This is reminiscent of the *camera obscura* reflex inversion that Marx used as a figure for the (distorted) reflection of material conditions by ideology. But here we are beyond the real conditions of materialist assumptions. Here we are in something closer to the hyperreality Baudrillard continues to evoke. The media-objects as "spectacular" images have entered a phase in which they do not refer at all to a "real" object. They create their own internal realism completely outside of mimesis. Thus there can be nothing in such media-objects that is false (nor true), nothing hidden (nor revealed), and nothing fake (nor genuine). The logocentric binary oppositions that belonged to the assumption of a presence within mimesis cannot be deconstructed, because they do not pertain. Hence, micro-obsessives open

themselves to a perpetual dreamwork without end, since there are no symptoms and causes, no latent content for the manifest content. Instead, they perpetuate an elaboration of the manifestation. The symbolic realm seems free to dream and redream without ever awakening. But does the dreamwork ever free itself from the prerogatives of the mass media dream? Do these tactical reproductions ever escape the strategy of the original product? In other words, is the microscene ever detached from Debord's Spectacle?<sup>vii</sup>

The obsessively interminable unfolding or infolding, the microopticon I have gestured toward, can be thought of as a kind of involuted fractal process, through which every development is only a version of its preceding form. This fractal proceeds by replicating a code, re-elaborating its own algorithmic form at smaller and smaller scales--to infinity. This opens the potential for a new mathematical sublime in the response to mass media.<sup>viii</sup> Like the Kantian sublime, it opens out into the inhuman; unlike the Kantian sublime, its inhumanity does not imply divinity--though perhaps a demonic terror. Perhaps it is an infinite regression. Or perhaps those born and bred within the plane of the spectacle will be destined to infinitely play on that plane. At any rate, the fractal dreamwork of micro-obsessives is very much a symptom of being unable to "wake up", to consciously create values, to act in life rather than react to an image of life. Given their divestment from the means of mass media production, the micro-obsessives' tactic is condemned to reproduction at smaller and smaller scales. This attempt to arrive at disalienation through a re-identification with some particular celebrity or commodity still lacks the actual position of investment in the relations of production. It seems structurally deprived and doomed in some pathetic manner. In the case of celebrity worship, one invests in a superior Other who is in fact merely an image, a "personality" rather than a person. This appeal and devotion to a larger-than-life personality constructed by teams of PR executives, managers,



and studios is of course to be analyzed as an attempt to transcend the banality of everyday life, to compensate for some lack in one's more immediate social field; but to see this as a *productive* deployment of fandom would be disingenuous and reactionary.

Are micro-obsessives not after all still part and parcel of the spectacle in which they burrow and borrow like mediated parasites? They are themselves obscene, the obscene prey of the world's obscenity.<sup>ix</sup> Confronted with these enclosed, elaborated hyper-manifestations of media-objects, are we not haunted by a postmodern solipsism, by a postmodern sublime that is the infinite playing out of simulacra? Confronted with these involuted fractal reproductions of hyperreal media-objects, are we not haunted by their entrapment within the strategic code of mass production? If the fractal code can proceed to reproduce itself at any scale infinitely, doesn't this raise the stakes of the spectacle? When a dominant strategy of reified media-objects enters a phase of simulation and then re-simulation, what tactics can wander out of this locked orbit?

### Tripartite Fetishism

In other terms, micro-obsessives appear to be possessed by the very object they attempt to possess. This might well be a definition of the "fetish"—if I can give it a tripartite etymology: The anthropological sense of primitive idolatry, plus its Freudian sense of perversely erotic object-relations, plus the Marxist sense of a reified commodity-fetishism. The subject is possessed by the inanimate object—whether idolatrous, erotic, or commodified. The micro-obsessive is at once possessed in this threefold fashion. In the absence of the sacred, the media-object can become an idolatrous image to both worship and transgress. (Indeed, Foucault defined transgression as a kind of sin after the death of God, breaking a metaphysical limit in an age without metaphysics.) The media-object also carries either undertones or overtones of an

eroticized substitute object-relation. Finally, since we still live in a "society of the spectacle," commodities are imagified and images are commodified. The fetish as reified commodity possesses a "mysterious" power of fascination., which Marx identified:

There is a definite social relation between men that assumes in their eyes the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.<sup>X</sup>

Thus even the objects produced in modern manufacturing can take on the appearance of a quasi-subjective existence through this fetishistic investment. Micro-obsessives seem caught up in this mystification of the social relations of production. Bits of the "spectacular" commodity form of mass image reproduction come to satisfy as a kind of fetishistic substitute. And this notion of possession is a significant play upon the ownership of possessions and being possessed by them.

While I think that the latter marxist portion of our tripartite etymology is the most decisive, let me dwell for a moment on Freud's interpretation of his patients' fetishism, since we are discussing a psychological component of informentality. From his couch, all fetishists were males who had a castration complex.<sup>Xi</sup> This is hardly surprising, since that explanation figured in nearly all of Freud's analyses. His reduction of so

many symptoms and complaints to this singular dynamic strikes most psychologists today as peculiarly dubious. Most psychotherapists today are not psychoanalysts for this very reason. I agree with their assessment, yet I want to suggest for the moment that Freud's text on fetishism contains suggestive generalizations which are relatively portable. (Thus we continue to read him.) That is, let us drop the explanation based on a literal castration fear and see what remains there. To read Freud without the castration complex stikes people as rather funny, since such a reading reveals that there is not much left in Freudian opus. What is Freud without castration anxiety? Some interesting items nevertheless remain. We find in Freud's texts that fetishism is aligned not with inner repression, but with denial of an external factor. That is, the affects and instincts remain intact. But an idea of reality that is patently false takes the place of that reality which has become threatening and anxiety-provoking. We could go beyond Freud here to say that when denial succeeds in a secondary elaboration, we have entered hyperreality. But for now I simply want to register the element of anxiety and denial in fetishism:

The ego often enough finds itself in the position of warding off some claim from the *external world* which it feels as painful, and that this is effected by *denying* the perceptions that bring to knowledge such a demand on the part of reality. Denials of this kind often occur, and not only with fetishists...they turn out to be half-measures, incomplete attempts at detachment from reality. The rejection is always supplemented by an acceptance.<sup>xii</sup>

Thus fetishism in general is a process of imaginative denial; it substitutes a less anxious process for an anxious one. But it never wholly succeeds in this, since the original external threat remains free to reassert itself at any moment. Thus fetishism

needs repeated attention. Psychologically, obsessives also repeatedly substitute their obsession for a denied source of anxiety. It is a substitute worry that seems easier to master. In the case of fetishism, this is aligned with eroticism. But Freud had already noted a degree of ambivalence there. Not only is the denial "supplemented by" a resignation to the very thing it denies, but also "tender and hostile treatment of fetishes is mixed in unequal degrees...in different cases, so that one or the other is more evident."<sup>xiii</sup> The -hostile aspect of this ambivalence, e.g., is readable in the "90210" case above. To sum up then, fetishism is not only an erotic attraction to some object, but it is also characterized by a great deal of ambivalence, and a partial, frustrated denial.

One tries to possess the object yet winds up being possessed by it. Micro-obsessives, in attempting to take over that which they cannot produce, fall victim to the illusion of reproduction. Strictly speaking, they do not have access to the means of production. Therefore they are thrown back on the more meager means of reproduction. The media-object cannot be possessed, since it belongs to the owners. Instead it takes the force of possession. Debord also noted this recourse to "magical techniques" by the consumer's "false exit of generalized autism" and for whom the "need to imitate which is felt by the consumer is precisely the infantile need conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession" (1967 219). This is not to condemn individual consumers or fans as infantile minors who need to grow up, but rather to condemn a total socio-economic system that establishes this dispossession and its compensatory possessiveness. Micro-obsessives are playing out an ancient tactic of the powerless, one that attempts to wrest power in a situation where there is only an absolute alienation. The fetishism of supposedly primitive idolatry attempted to gain access to cosmic power by reducing it to an icon to be propitiated and manipulated. The sexual fetishism of erotic objects attempted to gain safe access to the Other by

eliminating its threatening alterity, its subjectivity. Today's fetishism of reified commodification attempts to gain access to happiness in an economic structure that separates one from the means of production of social values. As this tripartite etymology of fetishism shows, it is essentially a delusory tactic for unifying the subject with an imaginary object; an object that functions as a substitute for impossibly remote powers--be they cosmic, erotic, or social. Fetishized media-objects, formed by and forming an obsessive fascination, are thus magical talismans which betray an underlying sense of alienation and powerlessness.

J. G. Ballard's Crash and The Atrocity Exhibition also address this new techno-fetishism that involves mass media. Ballard is the author of "Why I want to Fuck Ronald Reagan" and also of the popular autobiographical novel, Empire of the Sun, which was made into a Hollywood film-- apparently the night and day of his personal planet. During a recent interview about the David Cronenberg film version of Crash, Ballard recalled that his boyhood survival in a Japanese concentration camp at Lunghua, Shanghai during WWII was partly maintained by a rather intense *obsession* with the very technology that bombed his former life--airplanes, fighter-jets, bombers. Ballard agreed that,

One does tend to fetishize them, because that empowers you in turn, gives you some sort of sense of control. You become obsessed, as I did, with the shape of the fuselages on Mustang fighters and B-29 bombers. It gave me the illusion of some sort of control over these instruments of my private destiny.<sup>xiv</sup>

Feeling out of control and fetishism are intimately entwined here. Obsession not only distracts one from very real threats and anxieties, but also it lends a sense of power. While there is obviously a great distance between WWII bombers and the new media, Ballard suggests a general link through the phenomena

of a fantasy and obsession. What is admirable about Ballard, as opposed to some trends in Cultural Studies, is that he admits that this obsessive fetish is merely "the illusion of control" in a desperate situation. In an interview much earlier in his career, Ballard warned that the emerging world of virtual reality --or here, "illusion of control"--heralds dangers,

simply because if anything is to have any meaning for us it must take place in terms of the values and experiences of the media landscape. . . . What we're getting is a whole new order of sexual fantasies, involving a different order of experiences, like car crashes, like travelling in jet aircraft, the whole overlay of new technologies, architecture, interior design, communications, transport, merchandising. These things are beginning to reach into our lives and change the interior design of our sexual fantasies. We've got to recognize that what one sees through the window of the TV screen is as important as what one sees through a window on the street.<sup>XV</sup>

Thus the etiology of an obsessive techno-fetishism under extreme and violent conditions is perhaps not so rare as one might expect. New media can become just as influential in their sum effects upon the imagination as unmediated experience. The fact that the film version of Ballard's Crash is controversial, (booed at Cannes, banned in Britain) might reveal something about its sense of threatening seduction more than its shocking perversion, or about its discomfiting revelation that our own mediated fetishism might become repulsive when dramatized on the silver screen. (As Kroker might suggest below, the shock of this work intentionally provokes a "repulsion" that counters any seduction. It forces one to recoil and gain some distance from every unconscious techno-fetishism.) Ballard writes in order to intervene in the

deployment of hyperreal media obsessions, and he fulfills the avant-garde function of shocking readers amid our own interminable dreamwork, forcing us to awaken where we thought we were already awake. For, as explained in his introduction to an edition of Crash, we are caught up in a world of

mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the preempting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen.<sup>xvi</sup>

He has called our world a general fiction, which makes the task of the fiction writer much the inverse, to "invent the reality." Since we increasingly "live inside an enormous novel," (much like the specter of a postmodern sublime that Fredric Jameson evoked), novelists too will be preempted unless they intervene in this existing hyperreal narrative.

At any rate, it is this "blurring and intermingling" of identities with commodities that simultaneously incites the micro-obsessive yet precludes any effective alternative. This is the underside of the deployment of informationality, the perverse implantation of informentality, the monstrous birth of a myriad micro-obsessive subcultures burrowing deeper into the spectacle without exit.

### Perverse Implantation

The conjunction of a new fetishism with the Internet recalls the sort of "perverse implantation" that Foucault introduced in the second chapter of his history of sexuality discourses, The Will to Knowledge.<sup>xvii</sup> Put simply, a system

secretes its own "perversions." Not only do departures from a norm depend upon the establishment of that norm, but also the "incitement" to a pervasive discourse about sexuality (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) helped to incite and proliferate a number of "unorthodox" sexual practices. Not only does the inappropriate refer to the appropriate, but new subjectivities are shaped through the discourses of power and their institutional reconfigurations of human bodies-- those subjected to the new disciplines of prisons, factories, schools. Today, the will to information implants the dominant subject of informentality. Around its extreme edges, we find the birth of "perverse" versions of this subject. They are departures from the norm to be sure, but coextensive with that norm. Similar to the "Other Victorians" of (ab)normal sexuality, micro-obsessives are the "Other postmodernists" of informationality. Today, this tripartite fetishization of media objects is the black magic secreted by Debord's society of the spectacle. Let us reread as Foucault sums up the process of the nineteenth century's perverse implantation, only this time with the contemporary "will to know" in mind:

The implantation of perversions is an instrument-effect: it is through the isolation, intensification, and consolidation of peripheral sexualities that the relations of power to sex and pleasure branched out and multiplied, measured the body, and penetrated modes of conduct.... A proliferation of sexualities through the extension of power; an optimization of the power to which each of these local sexualities gave a surface of intervention: this concatenation...has been ensured and relayed by the countless economic interests which, with the help of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution, and pornography, have tapped into both this analytical multiplication of pleasure and this optimization of the power that controls it. Pleasure and power do not cancel or



turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement (48).

In the place of bodies and sex, the cybernetic era has virtual identities and orgies of "communication". Rather than a proliferation of peripheral sexualities, we have the proliferation of peripheral informentalities. What remains today is those "countless economic interests" assisted by telematics, cybernetics, and the stage of celebrities: a complex network in which pleasure and power reinforce each other. One symptom of this is that some of the micro-obsessive websites are ambiguously corporate. Like the "Johnny Quest" site already mentioned, it has become difficult to tell the difference between a fanatical homegrown site devoted to detailed cataloging of every episode of a cartoon from the 1970s to a similar site sponsored by the producers. Such ambiguous sites are fairly common. Many of the type of newsgroups listed above might well have been initiated by corporate producers, even though the consumers ostensibly play a major role there. Nearly every film star and music group turn out to have at least several web sites devoted to the collection of their trivia; and at least one of those sites generally turns out to be the commercial enterprise of their producers. In many cases, the corporate commercial site incites consumers to "participate" by playing the role of micro-obsessive fan. Obversely, some sites originating from within a fan group evolve to the point where they attract a kind of corporate take-over and reappropriation by the media producers. My point is that if the consumer is collapsed into an indistinguishable role with the producer, this is far from the kind of resistance envisioned by Cultural Studies. The consumer does not become a genuine producer, but rather a simulated producer, an imitation without difference, a collapse of the subject into the spectacle.

Another symptomatic instance, this one more

postmodern, is that a music promotion company in Japan, Hori Productions, has created a teenage idol, a virtual celebrity who lives only in cyberspace. But this personality explicitly poses as unreal, a cyborg simulation of a girl, though this is precisely a big part of "her" attraction: "She looks almost human." This virtual idol is a simulacrum, that is, an artificial version of what was always already an unreal artifice--the media persona of the star. The producers named her DK-96, for both Digital Kid and Date Kyoko, a typical Japanese name. DK-96 has a hit song recording out getting a air time on the radio and a music video showing her dancing and strolling through downtown Tokyo. This simulacrum of a market-researched popstar appears with a 3-D likeness and a complete biography. "She" gets e-mail and faxes from admiring fans. DK-96 is a hyperreal example of a perverse implantation. She is a corporate-imaginary idol, a sexy star for adolescent boys. Although she is virtual, DK-96 is quite literally a fetish. And her hit song is ironically titled, "Love Communication."<sup>xviii</sup>

Sometimes art imitates reality, other times reality imitates art. DK-96 was produced circa 1996. Here it is hard to say, but it should be pointed out that in the same year, cyberpunk fiction writer, William Gibson, published a novel titled Idoru. The title refers to the Japanese term for those teen-idols, manufactured through corporate PR to be "famous" for a year, then turned over for the new year's model. The "idoru" is a "real" girl, turned into a personality, a shooting star across the spectacle's wide sky. But DK-96 and the idoru in Gibson's novel are both simulations through and through. Gibson's fiction has the freedom to go where the corporation want to go in the future-- the idoru will be walking talking three-dimensional hologram, animated by a programmed artificial intelligence. She will be the perfect embodiment of a female idol. Interestingly, in the novel, "she" also becomes a sexual fetish, highly desired and possessed by a wealthy man who wants no threat of the Other's subjective demands. Like Ballard before him, Gibson continues to "invent the reality" which reveals the

generalized fiction of our world.

### The Theory of Postmodern Pathologies

Pathologies of the postmodern subject have already been theorized. In order to clarify this passage about micro-obsessives, I can distinguish from and multiply a number of perspectives by rehearsing three here. The postmodernist pathologies so far have been "schizophrenia," "phantasmatic inhibition," and the "possessed individual." They all have similar properties. Here I want to make an explicit comparison between the extreme edge of informentality and the theories of postmodern pathology, just as the emerging picture of a postindustrial society of the "information age" overlaps considerably with the emerging picture of postmodern culture.

Schizophrenia is the privileged form of pathology today. At least this is the postmodern "schizophrenia" analyzed by both Jameson and Baudrillard.<sup>xix</sup> For the Victorians, it was hysteria; for the moderns it was paranoia.<sup>xx</sup> Today, the rise of information networks and informentality has led to a new pathology, neither hysteric nor paranoid. What I have called micro-obsessives are clearly in direct kinship with this new schizoid subject. Jameson's version of postmodern schizophrenia is quite similar to Baudrillard's, and his schizoid is a postmodern mode of subjectivity, "an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence" (1983 119). These material signifiers generally take the form of media objects. We should not try to square this with the DSM IV of official psychiatry, and Jameson at least acknowledges this (1983 118-119). He points out that his source is Lacan's structuralist description of schizophrenia as a language disorder-- something that current neuro-pathology genetics would find misleading at best.<sup>xxi</sup> But for me, either source is still equally dubious. Having myself worked for three years in a psychiatric hospital with

hundreds of diverse people labelled as schizophrenics, I will always find the term too crude. In psychiatry it has become a catch-all category, especially deployed when diagnosis is ambiguous. Here it is used by Jameson as a conceptual model for a subjectivity tendency, not as a diagnostic category; as an aesthetic interpellation or implied subject, not as therapeutics. Jameson, after all, arrives at his description of postmodern schizophrenia through a reading of contemporary experimental poetry, video, sculpture, and architecture-- and he is at pains to insist that he is *not* calling those avant-garde artists schizophrenics. But Baudrillard tends to see it as less an aesthetic positioning in the superstructure than as a widespread mode of being, something Jameson tacitly suggests, but cautiously withholds. In Baudrillard's more hyperbolic and provocative rhetoric, schizophrenia is indistinguishable from current mass culture.

In Baudrillard's version, the postmodern schizophrenics have a direct relationship to "the obscene," since they are "bereft of every scene" and "open to everything in spite of" themselves. Schizophrenics do not experience the loss of reality (as they should according to psychiatry), nor the inability to communicate (which psychoanalysis attributes to their incurable lack of a transference relationship), but rather the reverse, the "absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defense, no retreat. It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparence of the world which traverses him without obstacle" (133). Baudrillard's fondness for chiasmus has again led him to transpose and invert the definition of schizophrenia: instead of a disorder characterized by unreality and incommunicability, he would now have it be a disorder characterized by hyper-reality and over-communication. Thus it will be recognized immediately that this version of "schizophrenia" very much overlaps with his definition of the "obscene" we encountered above. For Baudrillard then, schizophrenia is the subjective counterpart to the objective ob-scenity of postmodern media culture: "The

obscurity of everything that is tirelessly filmed, filtered, reviewed and corrected under the wide-angle lens of the social, of morality and information" (59).

It is difficult to assess, however, Baudrillard's critical attitude toward that which he describes. He refuses to suggest alternatives. He refuses both pathos and irony, yet betrays hints of both at once. His tone is neither wholly tragic nor comic. One senses a paradoxically hopeful cynicism, a resignation that continually oscillates between exhaustion and excitement. His texts do not so much describe as evoke; and they evoke the unconscious scenario of postmodernity. His is a dreamwork of a world that never awakens. But this wily escape from evaluation is not the case with our next theoretician of postmodern pathology, probably because Julia Kristeva confronts this quotidian suffering in person in her practice as a psychoanalyst. Her critical reaction comes in the form of therapy.

During an interview about her recent book, New Maladies of the Soul, Julia Kristeva reports that her patients now seem less and less able to represent their own inner life. This lack of self-representation is associated with a certain loss of the category of meaning. (We can clearly hear an echo of the old term, "alienation," though Kristeva does not use it.) It no longer occurs to her clients that their own images might have some meaning, some link to their interior drives and states of being. People are so overwhelmed by "a relentless desire for social or financial success" that they have forgotten to develop an inner life (86). We can easily read into this the deleterious effects of capitalism, although Kristeva only subtly highlights this aspect. Still this statement echoes Karen Horney from a slightly earlier period, that of The Neurotic Personality of Our Time. Horney had concluded in 1937 that her patients' conflicts were largely incited by a cultural emphasis on competition and success. While the West prides itself on an amplification of the individual soul, it has simultaneously developed an economy that denigrates a genuinely reflective

inner life. Both Horney and Kristeva arrive at the term "false self" to describe the result. At the stage of the commodity spectacle, images are so capitalized that it no longer occurs to people caught up in such a society that those images were once borne upon an immensely thick hermeneutic realm, profuse with potentially private meanings, inner significance. Now all persons are "personalities" and all images are brand names; and their ultimate signification is always the same: you are what you buy; you must buy in order to be. Or, as Debord sounds out the new reduction of meaning to one neo-Hegelian process in the Spectacle: "What appears is good; what is good appears."<sup>xxii</sup> It is no accident that Kristeva also comes back to Debord in this regard in New Maladies. Using one of her clients as an exemplar of contemporary complaints on the couch, Kristeva concludes that he "could thus be considered a symbolic emblem of contemporary man—an actor or consumer of the society of the spectacle who has run out of imagination" (10). This is one of her "new maladies of the soul" and one which she terms "phantasmatic inhibition."<sup>xxiii</sup> In our world, "both the producer and the consumer of images suffer from lack of imagination" (10). Thus her patients are not isolated individuals with inexplicable perversions, but they are children of the times. To return to that interview, Kristeva confesses: "I believe that the new maladies I discuss are maladies of civilization" (86). This term "civilization" remains vague unless we recall that she has already referred more specifically to the society of the spectacle. This is not the same Freudian Civilization and its Discontents in which libidinal sublimation has reached dangerous levels. This is instead a civilization described by Horney and Debord. Or as Kristeva continues, "we are approaching the ideal of a superman who would be satisfied with a pill and a television screen....For now, at any rate, those who try to live without a psychic space are quickly exposed to exhaustion, relationship difficulties, and extreme frustration" (86). What Kristeva manages to do in this text is to

reveal the psychological aspect of Debord's ideological analysis. For "we usually behave like passive consumers for whom images act as a bludgeon. Images can absorb psychic life, but they can also keep it from growing in a personal way" (87). With the decline of a valid public sphere, we see a parallel decline of private meaning. This is no accident, since they depend upon one another. Or, now they have folded in on each other in a cross cancellation. The private self is supplanted by the mass self, while the public is supplanted by an exterior intimacy. The impoverishment of the soul in Kristeva's clients leads her to write in favor of the inner situation, just as Debord attacked the outer situation. She surveys the postmodern metropolis:

What might one do in such a city? Nothing but buy and sell goods and images, which amounts to the same thing, since they both are dull, shallow symbols. Those who can or wish to preserve a lifestyle that downplays opulence as well as misery will need to create a space for an "inner zone"—a secret garden, an intimate quarter, a more simply and ambitiously, a psychic life (27).

The only difference here is that Debord's Situationists did not want a secret garden so much as a festival; and they did not call for individual production so much as Workers' Councils for collective participation in production. But while Debord's work is an exact and exacting description of contemporary political economy and culture, it lacks any significant psychology.<sup>xxiv</sup> Humanity there is thoroughly a secondary effect of ideology, economics, and the mode of spectacle. This very inversion, as Debord shows, is itself a function of the spectacle society. Yet Debord's analysis, in avoiding the interiority of bourgeois psychology, tends to confirm and reinscribe this inverted function, this loss of a soul space, by making commodity-images ride in the saddle while humanity gallops along. As an illustration, it would suffice to contrast

Debord's films with those of Cassavetes to show what is missing in this picture. For the paradox is that "spectacular" relations are still (distorted) personal relations. Works such as this one by Kristeva help to illuminate this inner aspect through her clients' depressions, confusions, obsessions, inhibited imaginations, and their slow and innovative disclosure of something beyond a "false self."

For the last figure of this survey of current theories of pathology, Arthur Kroker names the postmodern self as the technocratic "possessed individual" in The Possessed Individual: Technology and the French Postmodern. Without realizing it, Kroker thus remembers Carl Jung's warning about the modern self.<sup>xxv</sup> (Where Kristeva unwittingly rediscovers Horney's modern psyche, Kroker unwittingly rediscovers Jung's modern psyche.) Because of relentless technological rationalism, Jung argued, humanity has "in increasing measure delivered itself over to the danger of possession" (253). It was against this tendency that Jung's psychotherapy attempted "to rescue us from possession and unconsciousness" by exploring and re-possessing those same unconscious tendencies. In that moment, Jung analyzed the "shadow" of instrumental rationalism as the rise of irrational fascist myths, movements that quite literally seemed to make normal people possessed. Those who repressed their own shadow, or unconscious drives, fears and needs, were condemned to be more "possessed by them than possessing them" Jung warned (187). Hence we might say that Kroker's analysis of the postmodern self is simply a newer version responding to that "increasing measure" of modernization already identified by Jung, now updated for an era in which technology has colonized the body, nature, and the unconscious. Possession, in this view, is haunted by the danger of another explosion of irrational myths (caricatures of inverted rationalism) and of repressed hostility of the sort Jung confronted in Nazi Germany. Kroker sees the emergence of a dangerous new subjectivity precipitated by a form of technocracy:



when technology is no longer an object that we can hold outside of ourselves but now, in the form of a dynamic will to technique which enucleates *techne* and *logos* in a common horizon, is itself *the* dominant form of western being--possessed individualism (14).

Rather than a western individual in possession of oneself, one is possessed by a consciousness informed by technics. Rather than a species that uses tools for our own ends, we become a species in the service of tool prerogatives, used for technological ends. The means have become the ends. Kroker does not cite Jung, but he does there cite Jung's more philosophical contemporary, Heidegger (14). To my knowledge, Jung never read Heidegger and Heidegger never read Jung. This mutual nonreading is directly reflected today in the mutual nonreading of those who comment on Jung and those who comment on Heidegger. They never mention the other. Despite their obvious differences (a psycho-mythology of the unconscious vs. an ontology of the human; integrating archetypal dynamics vs. authentic *Dasein*), the two work out of a very similar sense of modern technologized selfhood as fallen, troubled, seeking help toward a better form of consciousness. Instrumental rationality, for both of them, alienates one from the whole Self (Jung) and from authentic being-in-the-world (Heidegger). While both thinkers seem hopelessly outdated in their modernist search for true depth, still Kroker's version of a postmodern pathology, a "possessed individual," reworks that same nexus of a Jungian / Heideggerian technologized selfhood.

To this critique of a fallen consciousness wholly possessed by technocratic values, Kroker adds a view of the possessed individual that "exists with such intensity that it disappears into its own simulacra" (15) and where it "is subjectivity to a point of aesthetic excess that the self no longer has any real existence, only a perspectival appearance as a

site where all the referents converge and implode" (5). What possesses the individual? It is "virtual reality" or "virtuality" in general as the "recoding of human experience by the algorithmic codes" of a digitized world (2). Here we see Kroker's text folding back into Baudrillard's, and it is at such a moment when I should note that Kroker is secondary as a critic. His text sums up a great deal of French theory and in general he relies very much on Baudrillard. Still I have chosen to include him here because Kroker has slyly connected Baudrillard to Heidegger, postmodern hyperreality to technocratic possession. Furthermore, his text is a hyper-map of misreading that finds its way around the anxiety of influence. Both more and less than a reading of the French postmoderns, Kroker's book strongly reshapes the work of Baudrillard, Barthes, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, and Virilio. In so doing, he deliberately interprets French theory as an outside account of American pragmatic-liberal technocratic individualism. They become, in his reading, the critical interpreters of "the virtual phase of technological society." Where Americans are

trapped in a pragmatic description of technology as liberation, the French discourse on technology begins with the violent exteriorization of the self, actually producing an eerie and disturbing account of cynical technology. Of technology, that is, in its fully aestheticized phase where speaking means the rhetoric machine, where living means simulation, where the self is a desiring-machine... (2).

In recasting Baudrillard in this light, Kroker also productively resists his "passive-aggressive" thought as much as he relies on him. As the invisible twin star to Baudrillard's theory of *seduction*, Kroker proposes a theory of "*repulsion*." Against the passive-aggressive complex, a dissenting logic of repulsion introduces ambivalence and the possibility of reintroducing "that implacable stubborn presence which we call a human being"

(80-81). Much like Ballard's ambivalent repulsion of an illusory techno-fetishism, Kroker's theory draws out an ambivalent repulsion of a virtually recoded self, possessed by an illusory liberation through technology.

### Triangulation

Like Kristeva, Kroker knows that the new malady has to do with a loss of individual ability to make meaning in a world that has eliminated "a private subject in a public space," replacing it with "a public self in a private imaginary time: a parallel self among many others drifting aimlessly, but no less violently for that, in parallel worlds" (Kroker 5). Here we recognize again Baudrillard's schizophrenic subject, who, due to the "categorical imperative of communication" is now solicited to function as "a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence."<sup>xvii</sup> I have rather quickly surveyed these three theories of postmodern pathology only in order to isolate an emerging pattern. The triangulation performed here is suggestive, an equilateral triangle. To the degree that they overlap and reinforce each other, we can see that patterns emerge more boldly than before. Baudrillard on schizophrenia, Kristeva on phantasmatic inhibition, and Kroker on possessed individuals--the three significantly sound out the same themes. And we can now overlay this triangular meta-pattern of postmodern pathology back on my preceding sketch of the fetishism of micro-obsessives. The diagram that results exhibits its fearful symmetry beyond any mere coincidence. In turn, this encourages us to be vigilant about how this crack in the crystal of informality might well reveal its overall structure.

## Endnotes

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- i. I want the term informatality to reverberate with the connotations of Barthes' "governmentality," a term later reinvented by Foucault in "Governmentality," (1991 87-104). For them, governmentality is a cultivated faith in the progressing powers of (a) government. The term "informatality" echoes this faith in the progressing legitimacy of informationism.
- ii. From the March 20 "90210 Weekly Wrapup" by Danny Drennan from his website, "Inquisitor Mediarama". Harper's Magazine reprinted it in July, 1996: 31-32 in their "Documents" section, wherein curiosities, bizarre documents, satires, and brief commentaries appear.
- iii. This example is from an unpublished lecture by Ellen Seiter, Professor of Communication at UC, San Diego, titled, "I Want My WebTV' and other Conundrums of the Information Age" given at the University of Oregon, April, 1997. I also owe my later comments about the ambiguous overlapping between corporate sponsored sites and consumer fan sites to a suggestive passage on this by Seiter.
- iv. In Coupland's Microserfs, what I've called neo-surrealism is articulated: "...on TV and in magazines, the images we see, while they appear surreal, really *aren't* surrealistic, because they're just random, and there's no subconscious underneath to generate the images" (44). Fredric Jameson called postmodernist painting "surrealism without the Unconscious" (174).
- v. One such fan, Steve Bender, who interestingly enough is a

marketing major in college, boasts of having seen Star Wars fifty times. Another fan interviewed in the same article has seen it 200 times. Register-Guard, Eugene, Feb 1, 1997, 1A.

vi. See my reconstruction of a Marxist theory of alienation that is compatible with poststructuralism: "The Returns of Alienation", *Cultural Logic*. Vol. 2, n. 1. Fall, 1998. Online: <http://www.eserver.org/cllogic/2-1/2-1index.html>

vii. This paragraph assumes that its collage of theoretical markers will be easily recognized. By touching base with Marx and Freud, I try to mark a continuity with modernist thought--here radically modified by the loss of a referent, of depth (ideology as distorted reflection of production; symptomology as distorted reflection of libidinal conflict). By touching base with deconstruction, I also try to mark its symbiotic dependence on classical and modern mimesis. But the postmodern requires a new theoretical openness. What is there to deconstruct once logocentrism is overthrown by hyperreality?

viii. Suzanne Clark noted this potential sublime to me in conversation.

ix. To directly paraphrase Baudrillard's "He is himself obscene, the obscene prey of the world's obscenity." Thus Baudrillard sums up the privileged postmodern pathology, "schizophrenia" (133). The phrase is itself a distant refrain from Marx.

x. From Capital I, Chapter 1: "Commodities", Section 4: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof. We have since learned to call this "reification."

xi. In the case of fetishism, Freud elaborated the castration fear explanation to include a scenario in which the patient had to cling to a false belief in the mother 撥 penis. Every fetish is a displacement of that maternal phallus. See "Fetishism" in Sexuality and the Psychology of Love and an abbreviated summary of this in his Outline of Psychoanalysis 116-118. I also find this dubious. What Freud never notes is that every fetish substitutes a controllable object for an uncontrollable subject.

xii. Outline of Psychoanalysis 118. Freud uses this example of fetishism to illustrate the more general "split in the ego" --whether through repression or through denial-- which is never wholly successful and perpetuates conflicts.

xiii. "Fetishism" 219.

xiv. Shone, Tom. "The Road to 'Crash'." The New Yorker. Mar 17, 1997: 70-75.

xv. Penthouse (London, Sept. 1970; reprinted in Re/Search, no. 8/9, San Francisco, 1984).

xvi. From the Introduction to the 1974 French edition of Crash, cited in The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations on the "Microsoft Bookshelf" CD-ROM, 1994.

xvii. La Volenté de savoir, or the will to know, the will to knowledge, the will to "truth," is another significant Foucauldian resonance of Nietzsche's book titles, here, The Will to Power. Its English translation as The History of Sexuality does not do this justice. Other Foucault titles show this significant inspiration from Nietzsche: The Birth of the Clinic and the

subtitled Birth of the Prison echo The Birth of Tragedy. Foucault's shift from an "archeology" of epistemes to a "genealogy" of discourses echoes Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals.

xviii. "Rising pop star in Japan exists entirely online." AP. Register-Guard, Eugene, Dec 7, 1996, page 14A. DK-96 is online at [http://www.dhw.co.jp/horipro/talent/DK96/index\\_e.html](http://www.dhw.co.jp/horipro/talent/DK96/index_e.html)

xix. I am well aware of having excluded Deleuze and Guattari's Capitalism and Schizophrenia volumes here. This is partly because their passages on schizophrenia do not maintain its pathological sense, whereas I do. Also the term "schizophrenic" is itself a bit schizophrenic. Deleuze and Guattari, much like R.D. Laing before them, see schizophrenia as a "becoming" process that escapes from the confines of oppressive Identity. Massumi, in A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia, glosses their usage: "Schizophrenia as a positive process is inventive connection, expansion rather than withdrawal... the enlargement of life's limits through the pragmatic proliferation of concepts" (1, 179). No attempt is made to substantiate this claim aside from reading Judge Schreber. But, since the diagnosed "schizophrenics" I have met favor withdrawal and repetition, Deleuze and Guattari ought to have come up with a neologism for their becoming process. To a large degree, they wished for an antonym for paranoia in this term, yet so-called paranoid-schizophrenics are common. This incoherence vitiates their otherwise admirable (de)activation of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, I will leave it to my reader to judge how their schizoid's "molecular" "microphysics" which follows "infinitesimal lines of escape" (Anti-Oedipus 280) might allow an opposite evaluation of my analysis of micro-obsessives.

xx. This is the rapid history recounted by Baudrillard (132) made even more rapid.

xxi. Scientific research into the etiology of "schizophrenia" now increasingly views it as somatic and moreover as genetic. The standard form of treatment is pharmaceutical, addressing "brain chemistry." Many cases do present symptoms of a language disorder, but others clearly do not. Almost all cases are characterized by a disturbance of the reality principle and high levels of anxiety.

xxii. In the film version of The Society of the Spectacle, Debord continues, "the attitude that it requires as its principle is this passive acceptance that it has already obtained in its manner of appearing without reply, in its monopoly over appearance." Hegel's original phrase was, "What is real is rational; what is rational is real."

xxiii. As an interesting coincidence for my essay, Kristeva then analyzes this same exemplary patient in terms of a classically Freudian fetishist's "denial of maternal castration" 14. But it was Einstein who said that the theory determines what we observe. For Kristeva's analysis also emphasizes the patient's "false self" which still mirrors social norms and is tied up with inhibitions--much closer to the manner of Karen Horney than to Freud. To pile on another coincidence, the patient's paintings are postmodernist collages of the sort Jameson calls "schizophrenic"--a pastiche of signifiers without any coherence. Kristeva's help shows itself in his production of a portrait of her, a transference to be sure, but one which created a new "work of representation, which opens the subject to its psychic space..." 26. We cannot help but notice the irony of Kristeva's career in this return to depth and representation after beginning with free signifiers in The Revolution in Poetic Language.



xxiv. Though Debord does briefly refer to--by now one should not be surprised-- schizophrenia. Drawing on the work of Gabel, he brings in the parallels between the operations of ideological false consciousness and schizophrenic dissociation and catatonia. His typically pithy comments have compressed in a few paragraphs what my essay has attempted to unpack. (Sections 217 to 219, Society of the Spectacle).

xxv. If Kristeva unknowingly reworks Horney, then Kroker unknowingly reworks Jung in this same context. I think of this as a cross-current of confirmation (and complication) in each of their endeavors.

xxvi. From "The Ecstasy of Communication" 132.

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