Another Alternative Reality? Exploring the Backrooms with Žižek

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Abstract

The ontological incompleteness revealed by quantum physics and the ontological stability imposed by the "augmented reality" of games such as *Pokémon Go* have become increasingly important references in Žižek's materialist assessment of the contemporary Other. This paper analyzes a current online phenomenon, known as "the Backrooms," that converges with these recent concerns in ways that are perhaps more interesting and provocative than films such as *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* that, Žižek contends, lead one to a conceptual dead-end. That is, we might conclude that there is an authentic reality beyond the simulation or that there is no 'real' reality, just a variety of semblances – either way, we foreclose the real that, according to Žižek, inheres as incompleteness and inconsistency. "The Backrooms," which began life as a cryptic and disquieting post on the forum *4chan* before inspiring subreddits, video games and *YouTube* videos – content that is predominantly created and shared by the 'gen x' demographic – ex-sists in a reality that is unstable and, so goes its lore, can be accessed through glitches and 'quantum tunnelling.' With this one example, we shall see how culture is responding to the same political and scientific developments that Žižek's materialism is also working through.
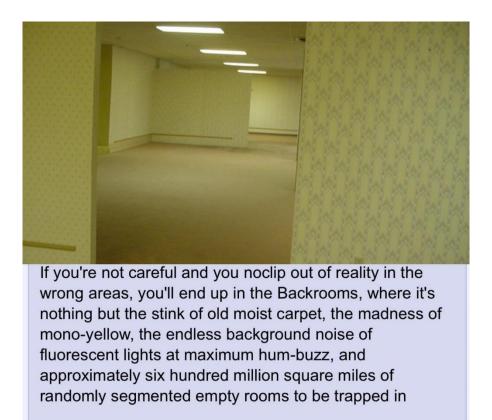
Keywords

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The Matrix has repeatedly served Žižek as an instructive example of the way in which art, popular or otherwise, sometimes falls short of the truly subversive philosophical insight. The set-up is well-known: in a cheerless future, humanity has lost a decisive war against intelligent machines who have wired the defeated party into a convincing alternate reality that allows the machines to farm energy from their sedated bodies. The film's essential draw was this distinction between the artificial and manipulable reality and the real reality of a world charred by cataclysmic war. According to his amusing apologue, Žižek "had the unique opportunity of sitting close to the ideal spectator of the film – namely, to an idiot" whose excited exclamations along the lines of "My God, wow, so there is no reality!" fare no worse than the various analogical interpretations that the film invites: the matrix as an updated version of Plato's cave that, for example, functions like capital and ideology, deceptively barring its inhabitants from the really existing reality outside (Žižek 1999: unpaginated). For Žižek, this positing of an exceptional space outside of the Other that governs our inner life is ideology at its most insidious: "What if ideology resides in the very belief that, outside the closure of the finite universe, there is some 'true reality' to be entered?" (ibid.) According to the Lacanian conception, fantasy is not the screen that hides the true reality; on the contrary, the positing of such a reality is the fantasmatic screen that protects us from confronting the inconsistency and incompleteness internal to reality. Alternatively, the revelation of Žižek's idiot (there is no reality; everything is a virtual arrangement of appearances) forecloses the real from the imaginary and symbolic.

An interesting twist on this vital structural myth – that Žižek traces back to the images of the pre-modern explorer peeking under the star decked curtain of a bounded universe – was posted in 2019 on a section of the forum *4chan* where it became the cryptic cornerstone of an anxious flurry of multi-authored story-telling, including a short found-footage horror film created by Kane Parsons and uploaded to *YouTube* at the beginning of 2022 that, at the time of

writing, has garnered 38 million views. The post consisted of a photograph and a suggestive exposition:

If you're not careful and you noclip out of reality in the wrong areas, you'll end up in the Backrooms, where it's nothing but the stink of old moist carpet, the madness of mono-yellow, the endless background noise of fluorescent lights at maximum hum-buzz, and approximately six hundred million square miles of randomly segmented empty rooms to be trapped in

God save you if you hear something wandering around nearby, because it sure as hell has heard you

It is particularly interesting from a Žižekian perspective because contra the two naïve and mutually exclusive suppositions that *The Matrix* invites and Žižek dismisses – there is a true reality or reality is just the groundless result of different frames – this scenario has been produced and elaborated in an online community that frequently draws inspiration from quantum physics' positing of ontological incompleteness and the generation of spatio-temporal reality through wave collapse function, both of which have become integral to Žižek's ontology. As shall become clear, the Backrooms is not so much an exterior or ultimate reality as it is a glitch in reality that opens to an unbounded surplus – what Žižek refers to as "an excess of a third space which gets lost in the division into outside and inside" (2010: 259).

Given the efflorescence of online reaction and world-building (including

several competing wikis, busy subreddits, alarmist *TikTok* clips and fan-made video games), this image and its description seem to have hit upon a shared disquiet. The photo itself had already been posted two days prior to a separate thread on *4chan's* /x/paranormal board that called for "disquieting images that just feel 'off.'" These are anxiety-inducing images in which, Lacan might say, we can perceive "a grimace of the real" (Lacan 1990: 6). They resist symbolic recuperation – the best that we can state is that there is simply something "off" about them. Many of the contributions belong to a genre of image known as liminal spaces: photos or digitally fabricated compositions that feature an abandoned area that are undead in the Žižekian sense – devoid of life and yet persisting. The spaces are liminal not just because they often present transitional zones – hotel corridors, parking garages, airport terminals, hospital waiting rooms and so on – but because they linger between two deaths. The neon signs in shabby mall plazas still weakly glimmer while the sign on an unattended sales counter continues to promote an expired discount: these are places that do not know that they are dead.

The invented term, kenopsia – a neologism that combines the Greek *kenó* (emptiness) and *opsía* (seeing) – is frequently deployed to capture the uneasiness prompted by these images:

> *n.* the eerie, forlorn atmosphere of a place that's usually bustling with people but is now abandoned and quiet – a school hallway in the evening, an unlit office on a weekend, vacant fairgrounds – an emotional afterimage that makes it seem not just empty but hyper-empty, with a total population in the negative, who are so conspicuously absent they glow like neon signs. (Koenig 2012: unpaginated)

What is realized in liminal space images is the same strange Hegelian operation that Žižek identifies in a joke from Ernest Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*. After

ordering a coffee without cream, a customer is told that because the restaurant is out of cream, only coffee without milk can be provided. Just as the negative here attains a peculiar existence beyond pure negativity, in the form of a coffee *with* without-milk, so too does the hyper-emptiness of kenopsia arise from a place that is not simply without people but *with* without-people. If for Barthes "[e]very photograph is a certificate of presence" (Barthes 1981: 87), the liminal space photographs are certificates of the presence of an absence.

In this positivized negative of the undead place we can hear an echo of Marc Augé's well-known classification of "non-places" that proliferated in the 1990s. These are supermarket chains, transport hubs and ticket offices; areas of "unmediated commerce" and "surrendered to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (1995: 78). "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity," Augé explains, "then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (ibid. 77-78). The non-place does not offer any support for identity and is therefore not an anthropological place; each subject passes through the non-place in essentially the same fashion as any other subject (Augé's essential disciplinary point is that the non-place thereby poses a fundamental challenge to anthropological study). The subject's behavior is entirely procedural: he or she "obeys the same code as others, receives the same messages, responds to the same entreaties. The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude" (ibid. 103). The interest in and uploading of liminal spaces increased considerably during lockdowns prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic because these non-places that were already unsettlingly anonymous and anonymizing lost even their nondescript activity, persisting in the same state of symbolic and automatic mortification that they impose upon the subject.

If the non-place is at least a temporary experience, herding the customer along its aisles and through its checkpoints, one of the things the written commentary to the Backrooms image adds is an indefinite extension of the

liminal such that it swallows up origin and destination, presenting the liminal space as not-All ("approximately six hundred million square miles" of empty corridors and rooms). This is a space of pure function without that function's realization; the maddening and eternal deferral of an empty instrumentality that offers nowhere for being to dwell. It is the infuriating architecture that confronts Kafka's land-surveyor in *The Castle*: "he was in the main street of the village, and it did not lead to Castle Mount but merely passed close to it before turning aside, as if on purpose, and although it moved no further away from the castle, it came no closer either" (2009: 13). However, as we shall see, the Backroom's principle of generation is fundamentally different to that which operates in Kafka's bureaucratic warrens and represents a significant contemporary re-working of his vision.

Žižek has himself professed a strange preoccupation with an architecture of the boundless intermediary, commenting that his dream house would be "composed only of secondary spaces and places of passage – stairs, corridors, toilets, store-rooms, kitchen – with no living room or bedroom" (2010: 244). The obvious philosophical antithesis here is Heidegger's Black Forest hut. Its rustic domesticity manifested the existential importance of the "living room" (with all of its attendant implications) and maximally abbreviates liminality – between its primary spaces and between itself and nature – leaving only unity or strict division. As Adam Sharr writes, Heidegger's lost ideal was the pre-industrial and self-sufficient peasant farmhouse devoted to the places that support existence:

> "Building" and "dwelling," daily activities of physical and social micro-organization, interact as philosophical craft. The sacred places of the house, entwined with necessities of mountain life, were of special importance: the altar corner (*Herrgottswinkel*), community table (*gemeinsamer Tisch*), childbed, and coffin place (*Totenbaum*). Here, to Heidegger, the residents' "building" and "dwelling" at once constituted

and celebrated their existence. (2006: 66)

Heidegger's hut was initially without running water or electricity; fetching water from the well and chopping wood was essential to the conscious art of dwelling inside and outside. It therefore did not require the "third space" that de-coheres these two spaces, the disavowed crack, where Žižek's interest lays:

> Inside and Outside never cover the entire space: there is always an excess of a third space which gets lost in the division into Outside and Inside. In human dwellings, there is an intermediate space which is disavowed: we all know it exists, but we do not really accept its existence – it remains ignored and (mostly) unsayable. The main content of this invisible space is excrement (canalization), but also the complex network of electricity, digital links, etc. – all this is contained in narrow spaces between walls or floors. (2010: 259-260)

Žižek's architectural tastes – his interest in the disavowed and extimate space required for electricity and his "admiration for baroque Stalinist 'wedding-cake' kitsch" (ibid. 244) – see him awkwardly straddle what Vladimir Paperny has termed Culture One and Culture Two as the opposing trends that determined architectural theory and construction in the USSR under the 1920s avant-garde and Stalin. With Culture One there was an "obsession with the mechanical" and "electricity [that] could be seen in Lenin's plan for the electrification of the country (1920) and even in Stalin's slogan 'Technology determines everything' (4 February 1931)" (2002: 119). The Futurist Victor Mayakovsky's declaration was typical: "Since electricity, I've completely lost interest in nature. An unimproved thing" (ibid. 119). Nature bores him because it sits dumbly outside of historical change and progress. It is precisely this exceptional and unchanging life that Culture Two and its monumental architecture, exemplified by the extraordinary model of the Palace of the

Soviets, had as its ideal: "Centuries will not leave their mark on it; we will build it so that it will stand without aging, forever" (N S Atarov quoted in ibid. 17). For Culture Two, the fixation on mechanics represented a kind of death: "[In 1947 Evgenii] Kriger juxtaposes the 'house-corpse' to the 'living' constructions of Culture Two. He quotes Karo Alabian (first secretary of the Union of Soviet Architects): 'In the early morning the Greek Parthenon awakens with the sun, it lives and changes during the course of the day, and it goes to sleep with the onset of night'" (ibid: 120). Of course, the Parthenon – whose "sublime appearance" Žižek admires (2010: 259) – no longer sleeps and is now illuminated at night with the aid of electricity. For its part, the Backrooms and other liminal spaces are another contemporary mingling of paradigms: they are a "house-corpse" that yet "stand without aging," fixed in or out of time as the electric "hum-buzz" of sickly lights persist without life.

There are three elements of the original post that are integral to its viral success and its interest as a contemporary approach to the ontological questions posed by *The Matrix*. I will put to one side the second sentence of this post ("God help you if you hear something wandering around…") for, as many of its readers have noted, it undermines the unsettling effect produced by the prior evocation of unending solitude and similitude of the non-place by recourse to a more conventional horror trope: the labyrinth's Minotaur, the deserted spaceship's alien heat signal and so on. The online community dedicated to a fictional plotting and exploration of the Backrooms is itself split on this question, with 'purists' insisting that the introduction of different entities and levels by 'expansionists' merely fills what Lacan calls the *trou-matism* of the barred Other.

1. *If you're not careful and you noclip out of reality in the wrong areas…*

In these opening words we immediately part with the reality that is

deliberately exposed as a sham either by the ideal reader who pieces together elements of the massive conspiracy or the enigmatic sage who reaches out from the other side and offers us a red or blue pill, seductively recommending that we consider our choice wisely. Here, transition to the Backrooms is apparently random; it can occur if we're "not careful," when we are simply existing in reality without reflecting on its imperfect constitution; its faults and tears. The moment that this departure from 'reality' becomes contingent rather than considered, a significant part of its attraction as ideology drains away, leaving the reader less rather than more certain. The conspiracy theorist's shadowy big Other is not in operation here.

The term "noclip" relates to the creation and bounding of immersive virtual environments. In a video game, 'clipping' refers to the solid boundaries established by the programmer that the player cannot cross. If the user enables the noclip mode, they can freely traverse the space, passing through doors and walls and even going beyond the entire setting, observing its artifice from the outside. Even without doing so, a player can still accidentally noclip out of bounds. It is an experience that, whilst rare, many will have had: when brushing up against or directly colliding with an apparent boundary, a glitch occurs and one is suddenly outside the enclosed world, thrown into some barely coded surplus space, a blue void or a mess of jutting textures, falling, floating or shaking hectically. Žižek has also used the analogy of such a glitch when explaining the effect of quantum physics' revelation of an ontologically incomplete universe: "When a gamer finds a glitch – when, say, they pass beyond a door that was put in the game for decorative purposes – they frequently find themselves mired in a mishmash of chaotic lines of code; in *a liminal space* in which the apparent rules of the game do not hold. *But these spaces are still part of the game*" (Hamilton and McManus 2021: unpaginated). Contrary to *The Matrix*, with quantum physics there is no 'true' reality outside simulation and reality is not simply composed of various simulations; instead, we find that, below the atomic level, "God was a lazy programmer" because

the further we go, the more we discover that "'all there is' is, precisely, not-All, a distorted fragment which is ultimately a 'metonymy of nothing'" (Žižek 2012: 641).

As computing power has increased, the open worlds of game environments have more effectively projected a potential infinity of explorable space, providing the player with an apparently boundless 'skybox' – a technical term that calls to mind the final scene in *The Truman Show* that Žižek references as identical to the pre-modern vision: the eponymous protagonist reaches the surface on which the sky has been painted and opens a door. As Markus Rautzenberg explains, the skybox, no matter how expansive it appears to be, traps the player in a virtual cave thereby establishing precisely the same dichotomy that is central to *The Matrix* while denying the possibility of access to an outside:

> This basic structure of the adventure has not changed much… even though big 3D environments and fitting genre descriptions such as 'open world game' suggest that players would now play in the open. But in contrast to Flammarion's 'wanderer on the edge of the world' even today there is no real way for players of computer games to escape the cave, because every computer game that simulates 3D landscapes is encapsulated by so called skyboxes, that as an impenetrable celestial sphere put an end to every attempt of further exploration. Skyboxes are domes or ceilings on to which textures are applied that depict cloud and sky-like patterns to give the illusion of sky and open horizons… This principle is also the basis for another well-known virtual environment, that – alluding to Plato's allegory of the cave – is called cave automatic virtual environment, abbreviated as 'Cave'. (2020: 122)

For Žižek this analogy does not hold. Glitches expose the internal

inconsistency of the cave in such a way that is not resolvable by either of the analogies' two standard conclusions; the pre- and postmodern (there is an outside beyond the coded cave or there are only varieties of the cave).

In early games from the later 1990s and early 2000s, the skybox's illusion required a charitable observer who would not investigate too closely the bank of low resolution trees or the clouds that formed unlikely shapes as they curved and warped around the sphere of the skybox. For Žižek, the interest of the skybox is not that it is virtual and bounded but that it is *incomplete*. On this point he draws an analogy between the incompleteness of a game's code and that of reality:

> What attracts me is an abstract idea, the idea of ontological incompleteness of reality… Here's my favorite story, which I found in a popular introduction to philosophy. The guy who wrote it tried to read quantum physics by basing it on video games. When you are immersed in a game, reality there is not fully constituted. For example, you have a forest in the background. If it is not part of the game to go into the forest, then the trees are not programmed in detail; you just see the outside. Why did the programmer not construct full reality? Because he would just lose time, it's meaningless. Why program the inside of a house if it's not part of the game? The idea – isn't it a wonderfully simple one? – is that God did the same when he created the universe. He stopped at a sub-atomic level because he thought humans would be too stupid to progress so far, so why bother to program velocity and so on? And the idea is a nice, cynical one. God underestimated us – with quantum physics we, as it were, caught God with his pants down. But now comes the true definition of materialism for me. We can fit in this incompleteness without God, we don't need a creator. (2017: unpaginated)

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Even that which has been coded still requires a progressive constitution. Solutions had to be found for limited computing systems to somehow present all of the objects in an open panorama. As Marc Bonner notes, observation was required for the reality to form through "data streaming":

> Seen in the faraway distance, the building can be a simple bitmap, but while approaching it, a low-poly 3D model will dissolve the bitmap at a certain distance. This blend-in process of LOD is repeated up to the most complex and sculptural model of the building when the player is in close range or right in front of it, and a traversable interior or general interaction has to be enabled. *Consequently, the game world only exists in the code as a coherent entity and pretends to be a spatiotemporal continuum in the eyes of the players via data streaming and AR interfaces.* (2021: 71)

What a glitch like an accidental noclip does is to expose the incompleteness of the apparent continuum, throwing the subject into an indeterminate and lawless void. Importantly, one does not "noclip *out of* reality" so much as one noclips into reality's gap; that part which the (divine) programmer has only partially coded. This is not an alternative reality but an internal inconsistency: "glitches illustrate and reify the line between the digital and material dimensions of games, a line that is usually camouflaged by an ideology that privileges seamless system performance. *The very processes that enable gameplay also enable errors and glitches*" (Schlarb 2021: 426). The Other on which the Backrooms depends is not-All.

2. ***…you'll end up in the Backrooms, where it's nothing but the stink of old moist carpet, the madness of mono-yellow, the endless background noise of fluorescent lights at maximum hum-buzz…***

It is no coincidence that the flickering bulbs, tired carpets and discolored tiles of liminal space images typically evoke a frozen 1990s; the time of that famous figure of unending liminality: the end of history. As Alenka Zupančič writes, what Francis Fukuyama's argument established was not the end but

>the impossibility of an end; namely the impossibility of ending this end. Instead we seem to be stuck with the end itself, spinning around inside of it for eternity. If capitalist liberal democracy, as the book suggested, constitutes the end of history, this end can last forever, can go on forever; it is not subject to historical time, but to its own temporality in which there are no intrinsic reasons for it to end. Hence, it is an end that can go on forever, endlessly. (2021: unpaginated)

There would be no end to the end and with the collapse of the Soviet exception, this extension was not just temporal but also spatial as the capitalist order became an "open totality" that would relentlessly subsume all that threatened to demonstrate it to be a historically contingent and closed totality (ibid.). Capitalism's essential kinship with crisis continually defers the ultimate catastrophe that would retroactively confirm that we really are living in the temporally limited transition of late-stage capitalism.

The contemporary dystopias of liminal space images have no futurity to them and no possibility of an event for the being that remains trapped in them. As Rebecca Solnit writes of multistorey parking garages and other such "anonymously ugly" places in LA, "what's terrifying about these new urban landscapes is that they imply the possibility of a life lived as one long outtake" (Solnit 2004: unpaginated). In the absence of a narrative in which things happen and there is a beginning and an end or a suspended and liminal time outside it, only the excess of the outtake, the Backrooms behind the main stage, remains, extended to the period of an entire life. For Mark Fisher, this interminable interregnum of the endless end is reflected in a 21st century

culture that is "oppressed by a crushing sense of… exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn't feel as if the 21st century has started yet. We remain trapped in the 20th century" (2014: 8). This tedium is not just felt by those such as Fisher who experienced an earlier period of cultural churn but also by later generations who have had their formative years pass in the 1990s and 2000s. Indeed, one of the first forum users to compose a narrative around the Backrooms photo remarks of the online community it generated that "so many people grew up in the odd transitional period of the 2000s, where things from the past sat almost completely unchanged, unmaintained, buildings unrenovated" (Chris Frewerd qtd in Lloyd 2022: unpaginated). This community dedicated to capturing and reading liminal spaces reflects a common concern about this inertia that is a feature of the non-place that in its eventless anonymity situates the subject in "an unending history of the present" (Augé 1995: 105).

A striking feature of the photo is its "madness of mono-yellow" that exemplifies the ever-present potential for yellow, so pleasing in its natural forms, to become aesthetically repugnant when tainted by an artificial and ignoble surface, to, in Lacan's terms, fluctuate from *agalma* to shit. As Goethe warned in *Theory of Colours*:

> [Yellow] is the colour nearest the light… In its highest purity it always carries with it the nature of brightness… its utmost power is serene and noble [but] it is, on the other hand, extremely liable to contamination, and produces a very disagreeable effect if it is sullied, or in some degree tends to the *minus* side… When a yellow colour is communicated to dull and coarse surfaces such as common cloth, felt, or the like, on which it does not appear with full energy, the disagreeable effect alluded to is apparent. By a slight and scarcely perceptible change, the beautiful impression of fire and gold is transformed into one not undeserving the epithet foul. (1970: 308)

What Goethe presents here is a kind of despiritualization of yellow, a reduction to base materiality. In his own theory of color, Žižek concurs with Hegel's counter-intuitive insight that a child's typical development from a preference for drawing with various colors to predominantly using gray is not evidence of the dulling effect of standardized education that ruthlessly eradicates imagination and wonder but is in fact the mature expression of a facility with abstraction. It is only the "reduction to colorless space by way of reducing sensual wealth [that] enables children to articulate the spiritual dimension" (Žižek 2020a: 39). What Goethe refers to as "the minus side" of yellow seems to present a retrograde sinking back into colour – a colour that retains neither spirit nor regains sensual wealth. This is the undead yellow of mass-produced office space that is neither renovated nor destroyed. It is interesting to note that in that in pop-psychological advice on the decorating of corporate workspace we are told that some yellow can stimulate productivity and creativity while too much or a particular hue "can trigger anxiety" ("Yellow in the Workplace").

Something of the strangeness of this photo is underscored when we attempt to apply Barthes' categories of the studium and the punctum to it. The studium is that which in the image accedes to the viewer's desire to identify and attribute meaning, to connect its features and figures to the imaginary-symbolic reality in which the autonomous subject participates. This is the activity of the ego: "I invest the field of the studium with my sovereign consciousness" (1981: 26). If the subject cannot do so, this is merely an epistemological limitation that can be remedied by access to some missing contextual information. The punctum, on the other hand, is the contingent detail that shocks the viewer and resists symbolic recuperation: "The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance" (ibid. 51). We might recall here the vague yet appropriate assertion that there is just something "off" about liminal space images. Much like the Lacanian distinction between the fantasmatic screen situated by the ideal perspective of the "sovereign

consciousness" and the gaze, as that which exposes a discordant lack in the Other that trains its blind stare on the subject, the punctum also has an ontological rather than epistemological effect: "it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (ibid. 26).

Where, in the Backrooms photo, reside the studium and punctum? In one respect, this and other liminal space images are nothing but studium; a significant part of their interest is that they are places that we all feel we have been to at one point or another and therefore dimly recognize, to the extent that one of the fictional hypotheses given for the existence of the Backrooms is that it is the obscure creation of a collective unconscious founded on a shared recollection of liminal spaces. This is why these images are often said to evoke a feeling of nostalgia, but it typically has a double valence, as the founder of one of the subreddits observes: "Viewing these images of barely furnished, or many times unfurnished yellow, tinted rooms, it elicited this feeling of longing and nostalgia. Sometimes those feelings even gave way to a bit of anxiety" ('Litbeep' qtd in Lloyd 2022: unpaginated). Nostalgia and anxiety are diametrically opposed: the former (re)constructs a pleasing, familiar and coherent fantasy of being at home while the latter is caused by cracks and discontinuities in this 'reality.' Scenarios commonly related on forums, and which these images encourage the recollection of, are the experience of briefly being left behind by one's group on a school trip, wandering away from everyone else to explore some dingy side rooms unrelated to the museum exhibit or, as a very young child in a public space, momentarily being separated from a parent and suddenly, without this foundational crux, having the symbolic unravel and become alien and threatening. In such moments, the child noclips out of reality, into a space where the code is patchy and illegible. The object that falls away here is the loving eye of parental observation, replaced by the gaze of an unknowable and unknowing Other. The panicked child looks up and sees only the blank faces of strangers who do not register her. Jacques-Alain Miller proposes something like noclipping when he

observes that in anxiety "there is a connotation of the passage from reality to the real, the breaking through reality in the sense of the real, and, in that way, it is correlative to a lapse of a signifier" (2005: 23).

Why, then, did Žižek experience exhilaration rather than anxiety upon seeing the images of Wuhan's deserted streets in 2020, describing the potentially liberating encounter with a "world out there no longer ready-at-hand, awaiting us, looking at us and for us" while referencing the kind of scenes that are common in post-apocalyptic films (2020b: 56-7)? Of course, had he actually wandered out onto the streets of, for example, Wuhan in March 2020 or Shanghai in April 2022, he could be assured the Other would have known about it. Coded by an almost omniscient Other that has voraciously seized further power, the studium here is immediately legible. Furthermore, the cause behind these post-apocalyptic images is universally understood. Hence Fisher, in conceptualizing the eerie as a feeling triggered by a "failure of presence" that is dissipated by knowledge of what has caused this failure, argues that in post-apocalyptic science-fiction "the sense of the eerie is limited… because we are offered an explanation of why these cities have been depopulated" (62). In liminal space images (to blend Barthes and Fisher's formulations), as certificates of the failure of presence, the Other is dead and unaware of it.

What strikes us in the eerie Backrooms photo is not just its emptiness and lack of explanation. This perfectly plain environment is entirely infected with an inexplicable oddness. The punctum that pricks us is everywhere. It is even in the picture's frame that is disconcertingly tilted. What is the reason for this? Our mind races to fill in this hole in the studium. Was the photographer in a hurry or unsteady and, if so, why? What was the motivation for taking this picture? Neither the photographer nor the location have been tracked down. There is no furniture, no doors demarcating the rooms, the wallpaper is similar but not uniform and the structure of pure liminality somehow conveys to us the impression that all of the 'exits' would lead only to something horribly similar. In none of the transitions do we get any hint of significant variation. There is in the

décor and structure a jarring combination of a dated and nostalgic domestic space and an anxiety-inducing warehouse expanse. Finally, there is an inexplicable gap between the left-hand partition in the background and the ceiling. This strange, glitchy space is (to use the term that Žižek borrows from biology and architecture), a spandrel; an unintended and 'left over' byproduct of evolution or design choice. However, in this instance, it is impossible to fathom what process had this as its side-effect and, contrary to Žižek's use of the term, this incompleteness serves only to disconcert rather than liberate (2010: 277-278).

3. ***…and approximately six hundred million square miles of randomly segmented empty rooms to be trapped in.***

In *Oedipus Rex*, when the titular character's terrible fate has finally been revealed by his reckless desire for knowledge, Tiresias sympathetically observes "Alas, how terrible it is to have knowledge when it does not benefit those who have it!" (Sophocles 1917: l. 316). The pain derives from finally knowing the law, from realizing one's subjection to fate. Kafka's modern Other offers a different pain; it provides no such revelation and the subject dies never knowing:

> Our laws are not generally known; they are kept secret by the small group of nobles who rule us… it is an extremely painful thing to be ruled by laws that one does not know… [T]he essence of a secret code is that it should remain a mystery… [I]f any law exists, it can only be this: The Law is whatever the nobles do. (1995: 437-8)

Here, Žižek identifies the standard Hegelian twist: if the Other's law is unknown this is not a consequence of the subject's epistemological limitations but a result of the Other's inconsistency. In other words, it is not just that we do

not know the law, the law doesn't even know itself. What kind of Other is at stake in the Backrooms?

Deleuze and Guattari read Kafka in accordance with their anti-transcendental contention that spaces (territorialities) are not pre-established givens that precede the lines taken by subjects and desire; instead they are generated by these interactions; by movement and settlement. What governs the proliferation of Kafka's bureaucratic burrows – which the (effectively) limitless expanse of the Backrooms might remind us of – is desire. If "where one believed there was the law, there is in fact desire and desire alone" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 49), this means that a structure of transcendence is replaced by a structure of immanence, and the space that might be bounded by an exterior becomes boundless:

> [One must] renounce the idea of a transcendence of the law. If the ultimate instances are inaccessible and cannot be represented, this occurs not as a function of an infinite hierarchy belonging to a negative theology but as a function of a contiguity of desire that causes whatever happens to happen always in the office next door. The contiguity of the offices, the segmentalization of power, replaces the hierarchy of instances and the eminence of the sovereign. (ibid. 50)

Similar to Žižek's dream house, because the fundamental is never happening in the room one is, every office and corridor that the protagonist reaches is *a secondary space*: "The theater in *Amerika* is no more than an immense wing, an immense hallway, that has abolished all spectacle and all representation" (ibid. 50). *The Trial* is "an interminable novel" because all of the characters and rooms are just "part of a large series that never stops proliferating" (ibid. 53) in accordance with the metonymic logic of desire. Kafka is the writer of the limitless liminal, the indefinite extension of a transition between states (such as that between accused and tried).

The description of the Backrooms as comprising hundreds of millions of square miles "of *randomly segmented* empty rooms" fortuitously repeats a term that was integral to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of space: the oppressive 'segmentarity' that Kafka, understanding that "the history of the world is already established, not out of an eternal return but out of the pressure of always new and always harder segments" does not seek to abolish but instead multiplies (ibid. 58). Despite its grand name, the castle is not a monolith, unified and singular, but is instead an "extensive complex of buildings… crowded close together" (Kafka 2009: 11) and, as is the case with the incompleteness revealed by quantum physics, the closer one looks, the more "it seemed to be a void" (ibid. 5). Through locations such as the segmental castle, Kafka takes what is a function of the state – the division of space into roles, activities and hierarchies – and multiplies it to the point that it exceeds the finitude over which control might be exerted: "he will accelerate the speed of segmentalization, this speed of segmental production; he will precipitate segmented series, he will add to them. This method of segmentary acceleration or proliferation connects the finite, the contiguous, the continuous, and the unlimited" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 58).

However, in the more recent depiction of liminality, there is an important difference: it is not desire that has generated the Backrooms. From the description ("approximately six hundred million square miles of randomly segmented empty rooms"), many forum users have surmised that the Backrooms had been procedurally generated – an operation that is integral to the constitution of many 'limitless' game environments today. Procedural generation is the means whereby relatively small teams of game developers can, on a tight budget, create massive and potentially infinite environments without having to code each location individually. For example, the creators of *No Man's Sky* – in which players explore a universe comprised of 18,446,744,073,709,551,616 procedurally generated planets – state that this obviates the need for what they call the "faked physics" of a skybox (Morin

2016: unpaginated).

There are several modes of procedural generation, one of which is suggestively named the wave function collapse (WFC) algorithm and was developed in 2016. At its most simple, if we were to make a 2D map (a grid of square tiles), we would first establish certain constraints. For example, if we were concocting a bland landscape with just three types of tile – road, field and hedge – we might confirm that field tiles can neighbor other field tiles but that they cannot neighbor road tiles (and vice versa for road tiles). Hedge tiles, however, can neighbor both field and road. The algorithm is triggered following these preliminaries and, as it begins, each of the squares is indeterminate, they could be any type of tile; they are like an unobserved electron and are thus in a waveform that the algorithm will collapse one by one. As WFC occurs, the virtual reality is generated in accordance with our pre-established constraints. The original state of potentiality in which, excepting the constraints, it is possible for any unobserved tile or pixel to be in multiple positions is akin to that of the state of quantum superposition. The WFC algorithm determines their positions through 'observation.'

As stated, for Deleuze and Guattari, space in Kafka's works and elsewhere is not a pre-existing given; it is instead generated by the lines of desire and segmented by authority. In the infinite segmentarity of the Backrooms, the enigmatic and inconsistent *jouissance* of Kafka's judges and officials has been replaced with what Mark Frauenfelder calls "the quiet horror of procedural generation"; the endless unfolding of algorithmic and undead non-place from which there is no escape (2020: unpaginated). It is through such algorithms that playable versions of the Backrooms and its six hundred million square miles of yellow segments have been created, in which the aim, having glitched in, is to glitch back into reality; to wake, as Lacan would put it, in order to continue dreaming. Of course, even when this collapse of potentiality generates far more sophisticated environments than a 2D map of water and land, it does not mimic the full complexity of its quantum physics patronymic.

While we cannot expunge the idealist conception of the God (here, the programmer and her constraints) outside the universe, the agency that observes the collapse of potentiality into reality, the constitution of 'The Backrooms' and other chilling virtual realities like it have gone further in the elimination of the comforting figure of the overseer than other narratives such as *The Matrix*. Given Žižek's increasing interest in video games and the growing role of quantum physics in his ontology, this current convergence of references in various online spaces and the strange narratives and cultural fascinations that it is prompting offers a kind of 'silent partner' to his theorizing that, despite recent references to *Pokemon Go* and other games, he has yet to fully explore.

Conclusion

To return to our introduction, why does this peculiar internet myth pose a more interesting and relevant scenario than *The Matrix* or *The Truman Show* in light of Žižek's long-standing and current concerns regarding the inconsistent Other? In reference to the binary option offered in *The Matrix* – the red pill (awaking to the true reality) and the blue pill (continuing to slumber in unreality) – Žižek has previously requested "a third pill… that would enable me to perceive not the reality behind the illusion but the reality in illusion itself" (qtd in Bown 2018: 106). Such a pill would cure one of belief in a straightforward division between reality and illusion with the materialist recognition that semblance, as Lacan would put it, does not veil the real but instead cuts into it, having the concrete effects of hollowing, differentiation and distribution. This interaction between the signifier and the real makes the transcendental existence of an Other of the Other impossible (there is no existing unity before or after the cut) and makes the Other that does exist inconsistent and incomplete (the signifier is arbitrary and has no 'natural' link to the real that it cuts). In her assessment of the Backrooms phenomenon and other similar online trends, Valentina Tanni argues that the relationship between fictional semblance and 'reality' that they

imply is more troubling than the liberatory traversal of fantasy triggered by Žižek's third pill:

> The idea of "glitching out of reality," and more generally the theme of exploring thresholds between worlds, is a classic trope in sci-fi and horror literature and cinema… In recent years, however, this suggestion has largely transcended the boundaries of fiction, giving rise to a series of cultural trends centered on the malleability of reality. A clear example of this is reality shifting, a trend that appeared in 2020 on *TikTok* and *YouTube* with young girls as protagonists engaged in the invention and experimentation of techniques of meditation, astral projection and lucid dreaming. Along these, there are adjacent practices such as manifesting and quantum jumping, both based on the belief that our mind, when properly trained, is capable of switching realities. (2022: unpaginated)

This blending of reality and fiction is evident in the kind of questions posed on *Reddit* and *Quora*: e.g. "Is the backrooms real? Please be serious." (Again, this blending is distinct to that of conspiracy theory which supposes an Other of the Other.) Given that Žižek is careful to specify that the third pill is "definitely not some kind of transcendental pill which enables a fake, fast-food religious experience" we should be wary of endorsing the essential premise that seems to reside behind many of the more spiritualist trends. However, as Tanni insists, the interest in quantum jumping (the shift between quantum states) or quantum tunnelling (one solid 'noclipping' through another) suggests that these trends are not answering a need for an escapist fantasy from 'reality' but are instead the cultural symptom of an awareness of reality's inconsistency and the absence of a reliable and transcendental alternative (the Other of the Other):

> This vast and multifaceted body of magical tendencies that we can

> observe online – to which the so-called meme magick also belongs –
> is generally interpreted in an escapist key, recognizing the emergence,
> especially among the younger generations, of increasingly extreme
> escape strategies: a form of defense against a world that has come to
> collapse. (ibid.)

"Meme magick" precisely derives from the effects of Žižek's third pill. It is the idea that, with sufficient appeal and viral spread, a semblant can have real effects. Hence Donald Trump was commonly referred to online as the first meme president; an absurd fiction memed into existence. (We should therefore be keenly aware that there is no inherent political orientation to the third pill.) The boundaries of electoral politics were so well-established as to appear natural, rendering the idea of President Trump strictly unthinkable for so many. Take, for example, the Republican satirist P. J. O'Rourke's pre-election quip that while Hillary Clinton is wrong about absolutely everything, she is at least wrong within the usual parameters. Instead of turning away from this reality, "meme magick" was an intervention that insisted on its inconsistency. So, rather than escapism,

> what we are witnessing, in fact, appears as a much deeper conceptual
> shift, which concerns the perception of reality as such. It is not simply a
> question of escaping into a fantasy world, but rather of searching –
> even in ways that may at times appear naïve or improbable – for new
> tools to deal with a reality that seems to no longer possess any hint of
> stability and permanence. A reality we increasingly struggle to
> separate from fiction, which sometimes appears to be born fictional,
> and that gets more and more out of control every day. (ibid.)

This expression – "born fictional" – suitably summarizes the barred Other that we contend with today: the generalized failure of consistency-bestowing

authority and master signifiers that is resulting in what Lacanian clinicians are diagnosing as ordinary psychosis. Online trends relating to this Other evince a conceptual shift that Žižek would recognize as Hegelian: it is not that we fail to understand our reality; it is that reality is itself fraying. Following Lenin, Žižek insists that a materialism must adapt to new scientific and political developments. Clearly, so too is online culture although this recognition of inconsistency is not necessarily resulting in emancipatory visions for, paradoxically, the Backrooms is a not-All that traps.

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