The Osmotic Subject of the Digital

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> "[…] we live in a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and, at the same time, to mask that disappearance" (Baudrillard 2008: 5).

That which not long ago was considered private is now overflowing the public; even Mark Zuckerberg expressed amazement over the users' willingness to provide Facebook with personal information, shortly after its launch he stated the following in a private IM chat:

> ZUCK: yea so if you ever need info about anyone at harvard
> ZUCK: just ask
> ZUCK: i have over 4000 emails, pictures, addresses, sns
> FRIEND: what!? how'd you manage that one?
> ZUCK: people just submitted it
> ZUCK: i don't know why
> ZUCK: they "trust me"
> ZUCK: dumb fucks
> (Business Insider 2010: unpaginated)

This presumably a youthful indiscretion still speaks its clear language, raising the troubling question of *why* one is a dumb fuck for supplying personal information to Mr. Zuckerberg, the

implication being that this willingness to share will get (ab)used. However, what is also crucial to note is his justified astonishment at how individuals unquestioningly recognize their part in the human-computer feedback loop and willingly provides the network with the input required to *join the circuit*.

Over the course of the next few pages I am suggesting that the discourse entailing the realization of a dystopia of totalitarian surveillance works as a kind of screen sheltering us from the fact that we are nothing more than *faceless* facebookers - depersonalized, emptied forms - of interest neither to the corporations nor to each other; instead, what we are moving towards is the liquification of subjectivity as such. When our user data is taken hostage we are emptied of personal features, submitted to a process of dissolution rather than prying surveillance. It is tempting to suggest that the Orwellian theme - as it is used today - serves as a gently balanced fright, a fantasy protecting us from the increasing gaps in the global virtual order, working to cover up the Real of digital capitalism following a desperate logic by which only nightmares suffice.

A big (Br)Other in trouble?

Behind the sleek corporate veneer there are nonetheless frightening cogs and gears, but the aggregate mechanism is blind, its only stake in humanity to generate profit through the networks of information exchange; this machinery will not take voyeuristic pleasure in watching you through your webcam lens - perhaps disappointingly - *no one* is watching you. However, rest assured that every bit of information extractable from the streams of communication will be collected and converted into dehumanized statistics and uploaded to a mainframe; your online-profile (your subjective remnants, as it were) compiled and stored in a cool desert hangar somewhere.

In erasing the public space, replacing it with the omnipresent privacy of instantaneously communicated nihilistic exhibition (tweets, status updates, Instagram-selfies) one might ask if we are not pushing towards another development than the one we so comfortably reiterate. What if, instead of falling victims to the dictatorship of the Big Brother, we are effectively facing something entirely different, namely a world no longer able to support reality? If the big (Br)Other of our fantasies vanishes, our frame of reference, the structure of reality itself disintegrates with him. So, if our (symbolic) universe goes down the drain it will not be on account of the evil scheme of some Big Brother-entity, but on the contrary because of our collective murder of this very authority through the hollowing out of symbolic reality by a strange form of de-materialized, subjective discharge. Jean Baudrillard pointed out that the great philosophical question used to be "Why is there *something* rather than nothing?"

Today, however, the real question is "Why is there *nothing* rather than something?" (Baudrillard 2008: 2).

So, we long for the dystopia of our former nightmares, and perhaps it is not that strange; the mirage of living in (imaginable) end times has always held cultural appeal. Nightmarish as it may be the compulsive recycling of the Orwellian fantasy still serves as a soothing screen concealing the abyss at the heart of symbolic reality. If it is correct, however, that the hollowing flow of the intensified network gain in strength by the day, the logic of belief represented by fetishistic disavowal - the formula and guarantor for ideological status quo - might itself be swept away in the very tidal wave it tries to disavow. ("*I know very well* that our society is inevitably caught up in a vortex of relentless technological subversion of incalculable dimensions, *but nonetheless I act* as if the prime threat is that of the installment of a traditional totalitarian state.")

The fundamental virtuality

The virtuality of human perception is a multilayered construct; transparent and opaque at the same time; starting at the transparency of consciousness at the level of the *biological self,* finding its subjecthood in the cultural density of the *societal subject*; interacting with the world and the code. Philosopher of mind and consciousness Thomas Metzinger writes that

> […] phenomenal first-person experience and the emergence of a conscious self are complex forms of virtual reality. A virtual reality is a *possible* reality. As anyone who has worn a head-mounted display or played modern video games knows, we can sometimes forget the "as if" completely […] the conscious parts of our brains are like the body's head-mounted display: They immerse the organisms in a simulated behavioral space (Metzinger 2009: 106).

This means that even the most fundamental, pre-ideological manifestation of a robust "natural self" rests on a primordial "misconception", a naive realism. A misconception of unity that, when unraveled, will force the human race into a future the likes of which never before imagined. For better or worse the concept of the self – perhaps seen as a concept spared the frailties associated with the constructedness of the subject - will also, inevitably, be deconstructed. Metzinger goes on:

> The self is not a thing but a process. As long as the life process - the ongoing process of self-stabilization and self-sustainment - is reflected in a conscious Ego Tunnel, we are indeed selves. Or rather, we are "selfing" organisms: At the very moment we wake up in the morning, the physical system - that is, ourselves - starts the process of "selfing." A new chain of conscious events begins; once again, on a higher level of complexity, the life process comes *to itself* (Ibid.: 208).

The seamless transparency of consciousness "hides" the virtuality of its representational content; Metzinger evokes the example of a flight simulator and its recognizable artificiality in comparison with the high-speed frame-rate and flawless resolution of our physical systems (Ibid.: 107). The furthering of the "consciousness revolution" and its inherent cause to question reality, through the subversive - soon to be *undisavowable* - insights of modern neurobiology, will expose the void at the core of the self, hidden under the rugged coat of the symbolic subject. In asserting this counterintuitive theory Metzinger makes it clear that "[t]he bigger picture cannot be properly reflected in the Ego Tunnel – it would dissolve the tunnel itself. Put differently, if we wanted to experience this theory as true, we could do so only by radically transforming our state of consciousness" (Ibid.: 209). The question is how an acceptance of this neuronal Real will come about; one can only wonder "*what*" would be left to perceive such a state. Let us for now settle with the proposition that not even the "selfing" process, on which the cultural subject rests, is to be regarded as a grounding guarantor for the perpetual *becoming* of what we call humanity.

#superego

McLuhan predicted the global village of electronic information but he also foresaw that it would be defined by discontinuities and divisions. The public used to frame the private; however, one might argue that a whole new kind of tech-tribe has emerged during the last decade of cumulative changes to the web, its information-substance, and its users. The intensification of the divisions is vividly experienced online; take for example the flow of hashtagged pictures of workout posings, healthy food and sunsets. Each **#**-symbol dividing the users in competition, and also from the following pleasure: the experience of the **#sunset** fragmented and digitalized, consumed through the cloak of the smartphone for the sole sake of online distribution, **#health** paid for by the abandonment of a healthy balance in favor of crazy diets, the undertaking of tedious **#workout** regimes in order for the subject to be able to extract enjoyment from a strange form of boasting asceticism.

Žižek reminds us of the superego of past that thrived on the internalization of prohibitions and notes how the liberal superego of today, on the contrary, demands the subject to enjoy inexhaustible enjoyment. If yesterday, one were not able to enjoy something because of overwhelming feelings of guilt, today the feelings of guilt emanate from the paradoxical fact that one is incapable of enjoying at the capacity required (to pair it with the efficiency of "postmodern consumerist-capitalism"); not enjoying enough has become the source of malaise. Nothing sensational here, however, the ways in which we try to cope with these ailments have developed into new strange realms of communication and hyper-visibility. Žižek declares his pity for people – like the "instagrammers" above - structuring their lives

with exercise, healthy food, the non-consumption of alcohol, cigarettes and so on. He notes that today

> [...] we are bombarded from all sides by different versions of the injunction 'Enjoy!', from direct enjoyment in sexual performance to enjoyment in professional achievement or in spiritual awakening. Enjoyment today effectively functions as a strange ethical duty: individuals feel guilty not for violating moral inhibitions by way of engaging in illicit pleasures, but for not being able to enjoy (Žižek 2006: 104).

So if this is part of the background of the development of late, in what ways does this enjoyment-injunction of the contemporary liberal superego materialize, or rather *digitalize* itself in the sphere of the intensified network?

If we return for a while to the domains of public/private, it seems to me as if a discharge is, *de facto*, gushing through the subjective molding form out into the public order. This flowing-out of previously encapsulated energy is effectively emptying the subject; the confessional, exhibitionistic compulsion of our digital society pushed to such an extreme that the individualistic strife has turned against itself; "The human race owes its becoming (and perhaps even its survival) entirely to the fact that it had no end in itself, and certainly not that of becoming what it is (of fulfilling itself, *identifying with itself* [my italics])" (Baudrillard 2005: 212).

The digital subject - not answering to God or Nature – responds to itself; without a master – accountable only to the incessant grind of reassuring self-examination – it is doomed to disintegrate into nothingness; social relations disembodied and blurred beyond any intelligibility. It is as if we have turned ourselves inside out, as if the innermost has become submitted to the generalized exchange. In order to forcefully project the "astral body" of internet presence one must adjust to the ceaseless instantaneity of the network, but as it happens, in doing so, the hemorrhage begins.

The networked subject (and its vicissitudes)

In his seminal essay *The Question Concerning Technology* Heidegger writes that "[...] modern technology is something incomparably different from all earlier technologies [...]" (Heidegger 1977: 14). He goes on describing why, by mapping out the turn from the productive process of *bringing-forth* to *challenging-forth* and the following emergence of a new paradigm. David I. Waddington explains the two terms in a succinct way:

> Bringing-forth is the mode of revealing that corresponds to ancient craft. Modern technology, however, has its own particular mode of revealing, which Heidegger calls *challenging-forth*. Thinking in the mode of challenging-forth is very different from thinking in the mode of bringing-forth: when challenging-

forth, one *sets upon* the elements of a situation both in the sense of ordering (i.e. setting a system upon) and in a more rapacious sense (i.e. the wolves set upon the traveler and devoured him). In bringing-forth, human beings were *one* important element among others in the productive process; in challenging-forth, humans *control* the productive process (Waddington 2005: 569).

Heidegger elaborates:

> The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth. That challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew (Heidegger 1977: 16).

The violence of challenging-forth leads to what Heidegger calls the *standing-reserve*, he goes on to ask: "[w]hat kind of unconcealment is it, then, that is peculiar to that which comes to stand forth through this setting-upon that challenges?" (Ibid.: 17). His answer reminds me of the interconnectedness of the intensified network and its users:

> Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [*Bestand*]. […] If man is challenged, ordered, to do this, then does not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve? (Ibid.: 17f)

In these short passages Heidegger describes the technology of the 1950's (hydroelectric dams, airplanes and illustrated magazines) however, applied to the frenzied logic of the network, they still provide a strikingly accurate description of our contemporary predicament.

At this point it seems suiting to take a little detour through a well-known, radical prediction of technological development. Vernor Vinge is one of the pioneering figures in the popularization of the theory of *technological singularity*; the utopian-dystopian scenario of accelerating technological development inevitably leading to the awakening of superhuman artificial intelligence. This theory is fraught with sci-fi fantasies and seems preposterous; however, Vinge also developed a somewhat more nuanced tweaking of the idea in his concept of IA, intelligence amplification, which might help shed some light on today's technological situation. "IA is something that is proceeding very naturally, in most cases not even recognized by its developers for what it is. But every time our ability to access information and to communicate it to others is improved, in some sense we have achieved an increase over natural intelligence" (Vinge 1993: unpaginated). This idea is a lot easier to grasp, the concept of the smartphone seems sufficient to back it up, at least in theory. However, Vinge still contends - wrongly - that this would lead to "the Singularity" (Ibid.). He goes on:

What happens when pieces of ego can be copied and merged, when the size of a selfawareness can grow or shrink to fit the nature of the problems under consideration? These are essential features of strong superhumanity and the Singularity. Thinking about them, one begins to feel how essentially strange and different the Post-Human era will be - no matter how cleverly and benignly it is brought to be (Ibid.).

Even if we disregard the Singularity, Vinge's sci-fi still raises some valid concerns about our present. We have certainly seen a strange kind of "amplification" since his text was published (Vinge wrote it in 1993), a crude kind of copying and merging of the ego has in some ways led to what one might be tempted to call a "Post-Human era", not in the sense of Vinge's barely concealed euphoric dream state though; the machines we are merging with are as unintelligent as ever, and in confining the information that was supposed to increase our intelligence to lifeless databases we have effectively outsourced the potential of any intelligence amplification to the cold logic of dead algorithms, leaving ourselves drained by "the extension of mind".

In linking one's informational output, as input, to the machine one simultaneously link the output of the network to oneself. This intensified form of communication is seducingly easy to adjust to; it flows ceaselessly, by its own momentum as networked computing does. The function of technology has always been to extend the human body and mind, however, what if the scope of this technological extension is beginning to reach a point at which its originating source is starting to dry up, consumed as life-force by the growth of the very organism of extension itself? Like a pocket of water being sucked dry by the roots of a young tree reaching for the sky; no singularity; but possibly the death of the subject as we have come to know it.

Of course the societal subject has always been engaged in activities of feedback and input/output through language and culture, however, since recently these activities have been confined to a delimiting logic of inner and outer/private and public, dichotomies ensured by symbolic authorities; the direction of the information stream between the spheres of social space manageable, an ability that the dematerialization process of the present has attenuated in a profound way.

Let us get down to the basics for a while and have a look at the actual cellular level of a biological being. What happens to a cell if the solute concentration around it suddenly changes? Osmotic stress sets in, causing a fast change in the movement of water across its membrane. Water is drawn out of the cell, at the same time hindering the successful transport into the cell, putting it in a state of terminal stress (Wikipedia 2013: unpaginated).

Let us allow ourselves the use of this cellular trauma as an analogy for the societal subject: a subject-cell embedded in a societal context must have the resources to ensure the regulation of traffic over the subject-membrane, keeping the input/output and the loops of feedback balanced; today, however, even physical barriers have been turned into coarse-mesh sieves. Deleuze proclaimed the shift from the society of discipline to that of control, from spaces of confinement to the ever-changing, flowing structures emblematic of today. The logic of confinement still holds the possibility of an inner space; the subject to some extent able to negotiate the flow of activity over its membrane-threshold. The digital disarmament of cultural and societal structures to the benefit of the free flow of the network, however, might render the subject-cell, neither free nor confined, but instead in a state of *atrophy*.

The osmotic subject of the network is successfully emptied out; its private content discharged into the surrounding soup of information. In this strange private-public sphere the empty form of the subject remains as an uncanny monument circled by the ghost of its former content. It is as if the contemporary subject, overwhelmed by loss, desperately tries to find its way back - via meaningless imaginary identification with its own ideal-image – to a "constitutive point" from which it could be observed, and once again blessed, by the elevated judgment of the big (Br)Other (Žižek 2008: 116). What we seem to find though, is no longer a firm gaze in which to reflect ourselves, but rather the eye of accelerating techno-digital capitalism, its pupil a dilated void, lifeless like that of a frenzied speed addict.

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