

IMAGINARY

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The human visual cortex processes stimuli at somewhere around 60 frames per second, with the ocular lens mirroring light into the retina, where photoreceptor cells convert it to electrical signals that the optic nerve ferries to brain. Images viewed for as little as 13 milliseconds can complete this information flow, called “feedforward processing,” and connect to concepts without any further feedback processes in the brain.¹ The media ecology of the 21st century capitalizes upon this rapidity: user interface icons and integrated wearable devices obfuscate code; 5G data networks attain transfer speeds of 10 gigabits per second; images online replace the fuller sensory experience of communicating, shopping, learning, or traveling in person; image-driven networks are the most popular media companies in the world and the most powerful, profitable data companies. There’s an app for that.

Google may be making us stupid² or Twitter may be making us mean—but surely the speed of the flow of information and the velocity of discretization are making our internal processors run on different stimuli. With algorithmicized consciousness, we click, we uptake. Seeing is reading. The superhighway acclimatizes perceptual faculties to racing, skimming, browsing, and other quick integrations. And the internet as we know it has been built and regulated to ensure that this celerity of “surfing” concords with profit: as Nicholas Carr observes, “The faster we surf across the Web—the more links we click and pages we view—the more opportunities Amazon, Apple, and Alphabet gain to collect information about us and to feed us advertisements.”³ Platform capitalism entails the hyperfunctioning of visuality as surrogate for other senses, and precipitates the cognitive state of “image overload.”⁴ The frames per second the eye can handle are less than half what video cameras can relay; a torrent of images is wreaking serious symptoms researchers identify as memory impairment, heightened anxiety, generalized frustration, chronic fatigue, and simply “being overwhelmed by a constant flow.”⁵

Drowning in a deluge of images without context, words without meaning, information without distinction—so much is the subjective experience in secular stagnation. Circulation intensifies to compensate for production lagging, and nothing circulates faster than images. Whether or not technological advances in image circulation have a net democratizing effect (as many media scholars argue)—and whether or not circulation can dispel the crisis of production, it is certain that they reconfigure cognition and affect. How contemporary cultural aesthetics express circulation-intensification, and how that base is modulated in art, literature, video, and theory that enthuse presence and immersion while negating mediation—this is the larger question. In what follows, we examine the

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Anne Trafton, “In the Blink of an Eye,” MIT News (January 16, 2014), <https://news.mit.edu/2014/in-the-blink-of-an-eye-0116>

2

Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid,” *The Atlantic* (July/August 2008), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>

This claim recurs throughout media history, starting of course with Socrates warning in the Phaedrus that writing is ruining memory [275B].

3

Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid.”

4

Rebecca MacMillan, “Here’s What Image Overload Is Doing to Your Brain,” *Nova* (February 12, 2016), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/heres-what-image-overload-is-doing-to-your-brain/>

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For “infowhelm” see Heather Houser, “The Covid-19 ‘Infowhelm,’” *The New York Review* (May 6, 2020), <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/05/06/the-covid-19-infowhelm/> See also her academic monograph, *Infowhelm: Environmental Art and Literature in an Age of Data* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

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See for example this story in *The New York Times* about a 2009 book that has subsequently enjoyed revised editions, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/06/science/seeing-narcissists-everywhere.html>

7

Aylin Woodward, "Life expectancy in the US keeps going down, and a new study says America's worsening inequality could be to blame," *Business Insider* (November 30, 2019), <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-life-expectancy-declined-for-third-year-in-a-row-2019-11>

8

Cynthia Koons, "Latest Suicide Data Show the Depth of US Mental Health Crisis," (June 20, 2019), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-20/latest-suicide-data-show-the-depth-of-u-s-mental-health-crisis>

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Chris Moriss, "Economic Pessimism is On the Rise Among Many Youths," *Nasdaq* (January 11, 2022), <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/economic-pessimism-is-on-the-rise-among-many-youths>

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Cary Funk and Brian Kennedy, "How Americans see climate change and the environment in 7 charts," *Pew Research Center* (April 21, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/21/how-americans-see-climate-change-and-the-environment-in-7-charts/>

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Avichai Scher, "Climate grief hits the self-care generation," *CUNY Academic Works* (December 14, 2018), https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/305/

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Jan Hoffman (August 13, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/health/Covid-mental-health-anxiety.html>

everyday psychic contours that are both mainspring of and feedback to what we could call "immediacy style."

The psychic peculiarity of contemporary life, according to a certain trendy leitmotif,⁶ is an abundance of narcissism—"Generation Me" aggrandizement, measured definitively on the Narcissist Personality Index and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. But just as the most essential aspect of its pathology is false self-centering, our era of narcissism does not perceive its own structural causes. Nor does the narcissism hypothesis adequately comprehend the irrepressible crisis in mental experience at present. Ours is a miserable society (though the very palpability of this misery can prioritize psychological categories as somehow more primary or immediate than structural ones). For three years in a row and counting, the US has been the only developed country to experience a decline in average life expectancy, which the American Medical Association attributes to suicide, opioid addiction, alcoholism, and obesity, explicitly connecting these factors to wealth inequality.⁷ Group traumas like mass shootings and racist extrajudicial killing are escalating. Viral losses exacerbate all this distress: governmental abandon in the pandemic has made the US the world leader in excess death and suspended millions in protracted isolation. The teenage suicide rate has increased by 70% since 2006; overall suicide rates have increased 2% per year every year since 2006.⁸ Significant majorities of young people in wealthy countries are repeatedly rated "extremely pessimistic about their economic futures."⁹ Too lateness also looms; according to Pew fully two-thirds of Americans say the federal government is doing too little to mitigate climate change,¹⁰ and one in five college students pursues treatment for climate grief.¹¹ Recent studies estimate that over 40% of Americans are suffering from anxiety and depression.¹² Anxiety is immersive, a case of apprehension involving breathlessness, dizziness, palpitations, an accumulation of undischageable excitation. Depression too is immersive, an intrapsychic conflict of ego and superego that results in apathy, unwillingness to engage, inability to work through. Futurelessness, isolation, anxiety, distance: these plights trigger an overwhelming absorption, an incapacity to relate beyond the self in neither language nor action.

The category of immediacy connects both these immersive miseries and the apparent excess of ego to the technological transformations and economic contradictions that define an age of hyper-circulation—a flood of intense immanence in cultural aesthetics, that eerily conforms to contemporary conditions of oil swells and aquatic surges. Immediacy's stylized engrossments mimic our epidemic paths of suffering, its inundative presence swallows the horizon of no future, its urgent extremities affright and awe, and its prized flow perpetuates the cult of "resilience" to which we are remaindered. This new phase of late capitalism—which might better be called "too late capitalism," a contradictory

moment where the overmuchness of lateness arrests itself—is circulation-centric. It expedites a historically contingent inflation of the image, and arguably the subjective corollary is an inflation of *the imaginary*. An inner flood marked by a lack of symbolic constraint—an insufficiency of language (“no words”), a dearth of social ties,¹³ a reflective glass maze, overflowing oceanic feeling—casts the psychic style through which immediacy grips. Intensity intensifies.

THE IMAGINARY IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Exactly what is the imaginary anyway? Image substantialized, the imaginary connotes a realm of shiny surface and alluring illusion, identification and reciprocity, wholeness and flow, that is also always volatilized by the prospect of delamination—dashed glass, discordant depths, and irreconcilable differences. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan posits the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real as the three distinct but interdependent orders of psychic experience. These reframe Sigmund Freud’s topography of the ego, the superego, and the id, respectively, elucidating that the domains of the subject are also objective realms of the social. The imaginary is the register of image, identifications, wholes, and projections; the symbolic is the register of language, institutions, norms, laws, practices, and order; the real is the register of what catalyzes the imaginary and eludes the symbolic—the impossible, the unrepresentable, the material, the contradictory or unmeaningful. In one sense, these registers describe psychic development: an infantile experience of embodiment and umbilical reciprocity (imaginary) matures into the mediations of language (symbolic), while an inkling of something inaccessible and unspeakable is retroactively effected by this progression (real). In another sense, though, simultaneous overlap and underlap of these three is fundamental, since the subject of the unconscious is variegated, divergent, never directly fully itself. Through both this developmental and this structural model, psychoanalysis enacts an unprecedented science of mediation: studying how language and norms inform desires, how desires can only make themselves legible in the distortions of parapraxes, dreams, fumbles, and symptoms, how the self is not self-evident but rather a product of social relations. With its conviction that psychic experience is socially produced, psychoanalytic theory can help explore the ways that circulation impresses upon the psyche: an overemphasis on instantaneous fluid exchange, an overabundance of images, an overweighting of presence, and overvaluing of identity can all preclude or foreclose the functioning of the symbolic. Representation slackens, and an unintegratable real impends. Immersion in the imaginary initiates all kinds of psychic disorder, from fantasies of self-possession and delusions of wholeness to refusals of the other and proliferating dualities, to paranoid gusts and polarized fluctuation. Each of these

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By many measures, like marriage rates, mental health rates, and surveys, researchers in a variety of contexts document an isolation epidemic well preceding the distancing pandemic. Neil How, “Millennials and the Loneliness Epidemic” (May 3, 2019), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/neilhowe/2019/05/03/millennials-and-the-loneliness-epidemic/?sh=59ef97407676>

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Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 75–81.

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For more on this "rivalry," see Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

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This phrase, and the mirror-screen analogy, most famously hails from Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 45.

disorders vividly characterize contemporary media culture and contemporary algorithmic logic.

A trope of mirroring elemental to the theory of the imaginary illustrates the role of images in generating the subject's view of itself: an infant perceives itself as a pool of sensations, fluid and disunified and fraudtly continuous with the mother, until they encounter their own specular image in a mirror, which imposes wholeness and coherence that fuses the sense of self, the ego.¹⁴ The image in the mirror opens to recognition and affirmation, affording presence, fullness. But desilvering shades these benefits, volatility besets the image, error lodes the ego: mirrors do, after all, crack. The smooth and the shattered, the immersed and the imploded—the polarities of the imaginary.

As the mirror trope emphasizes, the imaginary is primarily a visual register of cognition: "I" see myself seeing myself, "I" am transparent to myself. This mirror relation models in a primary way what relations with others seem to involve: "I" identify with my own whole image and symmetrically presume that the other is similarly whole; "I" consolidate at the cost of separation from a newly discretized m(other), who would, after all, prop the baby before the mirror. The image of the self as integrated and ideal redounds to an image of the other that absents their noncoincidence with their image. In the imaginary, self and other only relate as these two wholes, in binary "rivalry": friend or foe, same or different, superior or inferior.¹⁵ Within this flat interaction, through these identifications and disidentifications, an imagined self, auto-erotically sustained, projects imagined relation to an imagined other, one-to-one—even though only one can truly be one.

Analogizing the mirror to the screen (and sometimes forgetting this analogy), film and media theorists have long elaborated the imaginary conscription ensuing from image consumption. We enjoy "the perceptual wealth"¹⁶ of the image, especially the moving image, for its conferral of the sense of mastery the mirrored ego imparts, but that wealth is often tainted by its merely replicatory status, igniting the worry that the real eludes our sight. Fullness pings so quickly to emptiness, complete ingestion bursts to utter shards. The more that images comprise our lifeworld—the greater the glut of hypercirculation, the shinier the pivot to video, the profuser the selfies—the more effectually the media substrate impels an immense imaginary.

Ordinarily—or, in less image-abundant times—the imaginary's one-to-one equation is complicated in the symbolic, the realm of the signifier. The symbolic spans spoken and written language, with all their detours, confusions, and metaphors; language as a system; institutions, laws, norms not of the individual's making. The symbolic stopples the dyadic mirror liquidity of body and ego / I and other-I, introducing instead lack, inconsistency, and negation.

Signifiers extrude flatness into volume, scaffolding the space of the social in greater amplitude than the plane of the image. The symbolic girds more than the identities of the imaginary: it is the terrain of alterity. Such alterity might assert itself as a kind of thirdness that disrupts the imaginary duo, auguring not just self and other but the other of the other. It might inscribe itself as the grammar or norms that structure the exchange between I and image, belying the nonverbal fluidity of one-to-one infantile relay. And it might make itself legible, in parapraxes and other symptoms, as the unconscious, the other side of imaginary self-consciousness. With its altering activation of the unconscious, contradiction, and lack, the symbolic evokes absence in contrast to imaginary presence, unpleasure in contrast to pleasure, death in contrast to life.

When this ordinary entrance into the symbolic is obstructed, the subject remains too much in the imaginary, and that would be the specular state we commonly recognize as “narcissism.” In colloquial usage, narcissism is a condition characterized by grandiosity of self and a lack of empathy for others. The name comes from the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus, a young man who found his own reflection in a pool so captivating that he could not tear himself away from water’s edge and literally wasted away into death. For Freud, such wasting unto death connotes an imbalance, so balance or equilibrium becomes one of the defining questions of narcissistic structure. Freud hypothesized that human subjects have a kind of scarcity of libido, and that narcissism rests in overallocating libido inward to the self and underallocating outward to the other. With his signature commitment to normalizing psychopathology, Freud took this matter of balance as fulcrum for arguing that all libidinal economies involve some degree of narcissism, since care of the self is required for self-preservation. This degree he deems “primary narcissism” or even, “normal” narcissism. Narcissism becomes abnormal when contingent cultural conditions whet it.

As part of his point about cultural conditioning, Freud locates the ego itself, the object of libidinal investment in narcissism, not as something innate, but as a mediation, the product of a construction: “We are bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed.”¹⁷ This development of the ego as a lived, contingent, and therefore social process becomes the focus for Lacan’s elaborations of narcissism, which hinge on image technologies. Narcissism fundamentally pertains to the image; the subject invests libidinally not in a substantiality like “ego” but in a speculative effect of the technology of the mirror.¹⁸ In the ancient myth the image floats on water and might therefore be construed as naturally occurring, but in Lacan’s retelling the mirror function encompasses glass, photography, screens. Narcissism becomes qualified as an attachment to the ego *qua effect of the mirror*, and the constitutive role of mirroring repeats in the

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Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 67–102.

18

Lacan, “The Mirror Stage.”

narcissist's concepts of development, growth, action.

Conditioning the very existence of the narcissist, mirroring also composes their primal demand: the reflection must be repeated. One selfie is never enough. An insistence on recognition is at the core, often distending into demands to be recognized in a particular way, and flattening the other as mirror, mere vehicle of reflection. This negation of the other perpetuates sameness: where there is no opacity or desire, there is no contradiction and no distinction, only replicating identity. It also flirts with psychosis, an overinvestment of libido in the self as object, repudiating representation, propounding paranoia; there is something of the psychotic's experience in immediacy's pendulating between unison and cacophony. The narcissist's recruitment of the other's confirmation invertedly transmits an effort to make contact with a zone of otherness, and now such efforts are channeled by technologies engineered to short-circuit deliberate relation into ever more images and ever faster circulation. Freud's greatest insight is that all clinical structures are effects of cultural arrangement rather than personality electives; the very project of civilization necessarily engenders discontent. An economy that prizes the circulation of images, human capital entrepreneurs, and the data-fication of everything into endless counting of the homogenized same, realizes in plasma the mythic promise of the fluid screen. Narcissus's mirror is industrially ordained.

IMAGINARY ECONOMIES

When cultural commentators and medical experts refer in the present to a narcissism epidemic, they are labeling the phenomenon of self-engrossment and other-flattening that evinces the immediacy style of psychic life, though such vocabulary neglects the explanatory purchase of economic context. You're so vain—but it's not about you. Psychoanalysis enjoins us to theorize with a lens other than moral panic—one that elucidates the historical and cultural conditions for the over-valuation of the imaginary. It is no coincidence that the word "narcissist" becomes a term of precipitously increasing interest beginning in 1973 (this according to Google Ngram), a nerve point for the particularity of recent economic history: contractions of the productive economy have brought expansions of the image economy. For a snapshot, consider the intersection of media companies and self-care commerce. Instagram and Harpo Inc, life-coaching and brand identity management, the \$4 trillion wellness industry,¹⁹ "I really don't care" couture, and the increasingly common phenomenon of death-by-selfie²⁰ all bespeak the big business self-care and self-promotion via technology supercompanies. Revealingly, these economic activities expressly coded themselves as "art": as the image creator Hito Steyerl observes, ". . . today, almost everyone is an artist. We are pitching, phishing, spamming, chain-linking, or mansplaining. We are twitching, tweeting,

and toasting as some form of solo relational art, high on dual processing.”²¹

Uber-creative spirit, hyperproximity, and insatiable imaging industries immure the psyche in imaginary coordinates. What sociologist Eva Illouz marks as “scopic capitalism”—relentless “consumption of the image” in an “economy of reputation created by internet platforms and social media”²²—inflates the ego and compels its ostentation. Mirror, mirror on the wall, we look, and we look at ourselves being looked at; we expose and are exposed in turn. Faster fluid circulation burns in the economy of goods and services, and churns psychically through images, perpetuating not just commodity fetishism but what Christopher Breu terms “avatar fetishism.”²³ Avatar fetishists behold the images at their fingertips, especially the ones they themselves generate in personal “presence” management, as spontaneous shimmer, with nary a thought for the scandium mines, chip microprocessors, server farms, and embodied people who physically toil to produce and operate them.²⁴ Plate the dinner, frame the photo, upload it to the hashtag, bank your brand—and thus fetishistically elide the economic relationships of data analytics. The willing ignorance in such fetishism is advanced by internalization of “visibility mandates,”²⁵ that lead individuals to misperceive digital architectures as their own self-expression. Again and again, quick visual processing occludes the technological and social conditions, and an illusory transparency obliterates any internal opacity. As the philosopher Anne Dufourmantelle laments this absence of absence: “In today’s age, it has become intolerable to “withdraw ourselves,” or else this withdrawal must be announced, scheduled, and registered, the secret garden is identified by a sign, which means that it is no longer secret.”²⁶ If Roland Barthes could still conceive, in his reflections on photography back in 1980, of “private life” as “that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object”²⁷ then it seems clear that the 2022 vision of digital image society preserves virtually no privacy, neither legal nor metaphysical. The ego, the first construction, more and more staged, more and more managed, then brittleizes. Unable to withdraw, subject to demands for transparency at once personal and political, we lose our own opacities, we forget that the chronically manifest self is not all, and in this forgetting, we overlook the material infrastructures of its illusory emanation.

Emanation entails endless presentation: always on, hyper-stylized, self-identical, perpetually in view. Obscuring the effort behind such visages foments a fantasy of economic relations as a plane of equally immanent fullnesses reflecting one another intimately, a forum of mirroring: “in our socio-economic order, the place of maximum proximity is not, say, the neighborhood, but the (now global) market: it is there that our most intimate and precious possession mingles

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Steyerl, *Duty Free Art*, 149–150.

22
Eva Illouz, *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 98–143.

23
Christopher Breu, *Insistence of the Material: Literature in the Age of Biopolitics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

24
A good study of ecological costs of media culture is Jussi Parikka’s *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

25
Communication theorists and sociologists even call this “a visibility mandate.” See Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund, “Gendered Visibility on Social Media: Navigating Instagram’s Authenticity Bind,” *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019) 4983–5002.

26
Anne Dufourmantelle, *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, trans. Katherine Payne and Vincent Sallé (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 59.

27
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 15.

Alenka Zupančič, "Love thy Neighbor as Thyself?!" *Problemi International* 3:3 (2019) 101.

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 37.

Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007).

See David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Vintage, 2011); Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Kate Marshall, "The Readers of the Future Have Become Shitty Literary Critics," *b2o* (February 26, 2018), <https://www.boundary2.org/2018/02/kate-marshall-the-readers-of-the-future-have-become-shitty-literary-critics/>

shamelessly with other people's intimate possessions and values . . . the market is the place of compulsory, structural proximity."²⁸ A society of spectacle in which sociality transpires through eyes,²⁹ it can often seem to individuals as though our work is the production of our own image, keeping up with self-manifestation while lacking most means to do so. Hypervisibility pressurizes meticulous self-manicuring, but the disassembled social—demolished public institutions, declining social welfare—makes it the individual's job to reproduce themselves. You do you.

Circulating self-image also commissions the imaging of the other. A narcissist's auto-affection circumscribes the other, in a diminishment intimately connected to sadism (an instinct to master; a gratification in harm). The sadist flattens the other, and engineers infliction to proscribe response. Barthes helps articulate the overpresence and overexposure in self-branding with sadism: in "the Sadean world," he writes, "the function of discourse . . . is to conceive the inconceivable, that is, to leave nothing outside words and to allow the world no ineffables."³⁰ Everything is enjoined to presence, nothing evades. Immediacy's auto-emanations and perpetual fluidity paradoxically calcify in this way in the stone of sadism, its inexorable control and invocatory cruelty. Without the symbolic to intervene as a certain defusing of the real, the outsize imaginary conduces to sadistic mores courting real eruptions. Philosophers have for this reason identified recent history with a "passion for the real"³¹—a pursuit of extremity, violence, and suffering as some antidote to abundant artifice—and "reality hunger"³²—questing for intensity behind all the bullshit, for irrefutable stuff that resists representation. While such passions animated the 20th century's projects of world war, they become simultaneously totalized and banalized by the 21st century's opening of near universal access to immersive technologies virtuosically hiding their own mediations; on Instagram everyone can be General Patton.

Much of immediacy's lure rests in the momentary compensatory solidities of imagined contact with an imagined real. "An imagined real" might imply that there is a real Real out there for a different kind of aesthetics, but for psychoanalysis a real real is an "impossibility." The mundane manifestations of this impossibility are contradictory: the real can seem exterior to language—putative solidities like the body; indescribable enigmas like death; unspeakable gaps like trauma; the unthought unthinkable; the anti-negation of the unconscious—but can also seem interior to language, as with the evasive chain of metonymy or the disturbing parapraxis of symptoms and desire. These semblances endow imaginary reals: ineffable experiences struggling for expression, signifiers that mean exactly what we want them to mean. Immediatism demands these imaginary reals, grasping encounters with what circumvents or precedes mediation—but its aesthetic and political effects propagate infinite, individualized,

phenomenalized attempts that perpetually repetitively circle, multiplying into a hall of mirrors. Trapped in the reflective one-to-one chamber, images eclipse signifiers, presence forecloses absence, and plenitude averts lack. Then reality-hungry immediacy egos ultimately disavow subjectivity itself, evacuating the dynamic of *sub-ject*, the throwing under the bar of symbolization, in a castration denialism ensuring there is no otherness, least of all in ourselves. Instead of opaque subjects and enigmatic others, limits and contradictions, the immediacy imaginary posits only self-commanded human resources, a vital reservoir of affective flow and identity property.

In the scopoc and fetishistic terrain, reals erupt, and the imaginary waxes while the symbolic wanes. It is this slackening which Jodi Dean, Slavoj Žižek, Mark Andrejvic, Byung-Chul Han, and others have warned of as a decline of the symbolic: a malfunctioning of socially sanctioned language, a sagging of meaning and norms.³³ In general, symbolic consistency is a function of tacit buy-in, collective identification, and repetitive social practices. We learn to speak and write, and we observe institutions coordinating and responding to language as though it is held in common. To say that the symbolic is in decline or disarray is thus to mark the loss of this effective common, to find that the authority backing the use of signifiers and grounding their felicitous signifying across differences in context and groups has dissipated. Words drift freely and as a result fail to secure an order of stable interpretation; to the extent that interpretations held in common can provide defenses against traumatic antagonisms, the loss of functioning meaning harbingers intensified encounter with the unassimilable. Such heightened exposure to unspeakables tends to generate a sense of immediacy: lacking common language, there is only the funhouse mirror of “alternative facts” and ghastly visages, distortion, and eruption. Skepticism toward reality, quantum performance, suspicion of experts, post fact: swirls cutting off collective norms and serving up personalized truth. In the imaginary, there is only appearance, and thus there is always unmasking, the interminable coronation of naked emperors.

The premiere index of symbolic decline is probably, as Dean argues, Fox News: a frenetic propagation of alternate reality with chaotic signification and extreme agon.³⁴ But think too of the recent metastasis of QAnon, the baroque conspiracy of a democratic vampire pedophile cabal, supercharged not on institutional television but the dark web imageboard 4chan, fomenting absolute apophenic conviction among millions, those who refuse to be duped. The paranoid position amid untrustworthy entities without means of discernment results in an impenetrability: impervious to facts, anathema to reason, lacking common language, there is no communication possible; as Dean cautions, “no amount of information, technology, or surveillance will compensate for the change in the symbolic.”³⁵ This wholly irrational dynamic

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Žižek names it though doesn't use the word “decline.” *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 322. Jodi Dean develops the concept, first on her blog and later in her work on communicative capitalism: https://jideanite.typepad.com/i_cite/2005/04/decline_of_symb.html.

See also Mark Andrejvic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information is Changing the Way We Think and Know* (New York: Routledge, 2013), and Alexander Galloway, “Golden Age of Analog,” *Critical Inquiry* 48:2 (2022), 211–232.

34

Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” *Cultural Politics* 1:1 (2005), 51–74. See also Dean, “Decline of Symbolic Efficacy,” *I Cite* (April 14, 2005), https://jideanite.typepad.com/i_cite/2005/04/decline_of_symb.html

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Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory* (London: Wiley, 2010), 129.

points to the dimension of enjoyment and desire: symbolic systems have changed, the medium of language has undergone transformation, leaving individuals jammed in their own sovereign mini-realities, identification and projection, imaginary unbound.

ALGORITHMIC CULTURAL CATEGORIES

The imaginary's one-to-one dyadic reflective paradigm for nonrelation shapes and is shaped by the algorithmic epistemes of the circulation economy, adhering the binarisms of social and cultural intercourse. In imaginary-flush immediacy style, everything flickers good or bad, relatable or hateable; the gray falls away. The two-dimensional images on screens seek to simulate the sensory immersiveness of off-screen experience, but lack dimensionality and depth of field; repetitive mindless behavior like scrolling ensues in search of dopamine hits that mimic full sensory experience; observation of events via moving images virtually coincides with events themselves—whether we're filming ourselves seeing a famous work of art in a museum or attending a protest, sharing viral videos of police violence, or fixating on hashtags for immanent transmissions from active shooter situations. Images, clicks, dopamine hits, and their capture as data become the modalities in which we live out our self-presence. Swipe left, swipe right.

Two sides of the same coin, these polarities embed the logic of discretization and data capture. Binarized consciousness, hot-take-itis, chronic opinionating, and feedback loops ensue from monetized clickbait, the 24-hour news cycle, iTech, the "extremely online," as well as a reverberating bankrupt ethico-political demand for either affirmation or cancellation. The flatness of this binary coin is crucial: when presentation is personalization, when all content is self, when experience trumps idea, any dimensionality, ambivalence, or ambiguity disappears. As a result, tension and contradiction are excluded, only opposition remains. This is all the better for the infotech companies, since the algorithm does not distinguish between good and bad clicks. Over 70% of Google's annual revenues are from advertising—roughly \$160 billion in 2019—and whether the activity is ecstatic or outraged, impressions are impressions. The scanning proceeds apace; it's all data.

Affirmation is the flat mutuality that immediacy style most often solicits. Consuming the style, we mirror it in merger: "it me!" Versions of affirmation orient everything from the accumulation of social media likes to university composition pedagogy, from "I feel seen" mantras to industrial scale self-help, from Hollywood writers' rooms to electoral candidates. It is an attenuated version of "recognition," what the political theorist Nancy Fraser has long described as the vector of liberalism which deflects struggles over power and resources into struggles over respect and identity.³⁶ The diminishment of even that deflected struggle makes

affirmation a truly hollow cultural goal, a rallying cry and demand devoid of almost any political content.

Dissection, the one-against-one opposite of affirmation, is an equally flat malice, whose quotidian installment is denunciatory exclusion. Snap judgment, main-character-of-the-day, zero tolerance: at varying levels of carceral severity, a common logic, Mark Fisher argues, of propagating guilt. What he refers to as “the Vampire Castle” is this fort of dissection, the blood sucking gotcha ethos behind “a priest’s desire to excommunicate and condemn, an academic-pedant’s desire to be the first to be seen to spot a mistake, and a hipster’s desire to be one of the in-crowd.”³⁷ Fisher has himself been denounced for this analysis, by those who view rage as democratically promising. But the black feminist activist Loretta Ross cautions against the misperception that “calling out” is a tool of the many against the mighty, underscoring instead that “most public shaming is horizontal and done by those who believe they have greater integrity or more sophisticated analyses.”³⁸ Vilification sucks as a strategy for solidarity, which requires carefully sieving differences to establish common goals; Ross thus teaches courses in the kinds of private communication, open conversations, and careful contextualizations that make up an alternative, “call-in.”³⁹ Immediacy’s surfacing of extreme affect poses as liberatory—authentic, righteous, spontaneous, unrepressed—but its delegitimization of mediation and auto-authority of presence, the impatience for intensity and the convicted certainties, vandalize relation.

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To clasp the drag in these algorithmically ordained oppositions, to actuate the symbolic as a crack in the smoothness of the imaginary and also a frame that scaffolds against shattering, is also to encounter a symbolic real, where what is contradictory, or excluded from dyads, or in between in an age of extremes, finds relation even if not direct expression. Just as interpersonal connections and political bridges require deliberate construction, just as the psyche is freed from the imaginary by the symbolic, theorizing immediacy as dominant necessitates stepping away from the thick of things. And it necessitates different aesthetics than prevail today.

In contemporary televisuality, much beloved content is governed by the imaginary’s duality of immersive flow and sadistic punctures. On every channel, every platform, horror, supernaturalism, cringe, and staggering violence total the predominant genres. While the tide of offerings might appear differentiated, a common endeavor of visceral activation through charged exactitude unites so very much content in a continuum of smoothness and shattering. It shows like *Game of Thrones* or *The Walking Dead* are openly proclaimed high-gloss sadism, if a project like Lena Waithe’s *Them* crosses the line,

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Mark Fisher, “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” *Open Democracy* (November 24, 2013), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>

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Loretta Ross, “I’m a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic,” *The New York Times* (August 17, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/sunday/cancel-culture-call-out.html>

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Jessica Bennet, “What if Instead of Calling People Out, We Called Them In?” *The New York Times* (November 19, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/style/loretta-ross-smith-college-cancel-culture.html>

there is nonetheless more reluctance to admit that revered boutique pieces like *Watchmen* or *I May Destroy You*, *Get Out*, or *Girls*, *Babadook*, or *Unbelievable*, in purveying unprecedented explications of black trauma and sexual violence, are equally commanded by the prism of the imaginary and its ruse of the real. Inflection, bound up with its mastery, links many of the most circulated images in the present, even though that is often obfuscated by moral righteousness, laudable inclusiveness, or seductive frisson.

Critically correlating the prevalence of such aesthetics to the immediacy economy also tacitly asks for something else from art and mass media cultural forms—posing a demand different from the passion for the real: a formalized solicitation of the symbolic. Though a genuine psychic emergency and a genuine stuckness underlie the imprisonment in the imaginary and hence the enjoyment of immediacy as style, the genuine response to such a situation must be more rather than less mediation—more arts and ideas, more ambiguity and adumbration. No matter how trendy or expedient, drowning in the extremity of bad affects without the punctuating relation to an other, propagating immersiveness against contradiction, and circulating ever more egoic image can do little but hinder working through. New constructions, new signifiers, new bases for connection, new orders of sociality can emerge only from mediation, not immediacy. Even our tv could be giving us more.

True, tv may not be the place to look for psychic relief. The clinic in psychoanalysis has understood itself as a venue for these constructions, because its form establishes a problematizing encounter with the other. Politically, mediating bodies like the union and the party have performed a similar function, erecting groundwork for struggles and inspiration in crises. Historically, the university has also made itself available as such a forum, minimally introducing students to other zeitgeists, cultures, epistemologies, and languages. Conceptually, the project of critical theory has been to work through symptoms and resistances, to propel thought through impasses, to negate what is merely given and then to negate the negation, convoking readers to collective composition. The tragedy is that both the omnicrisis and the inflated imaginary impede all of these mediations—so maybe tv is the thing this year.