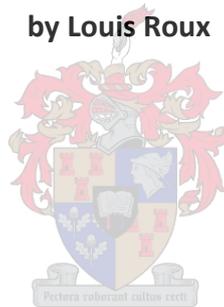


**Nihil Moralia:
Culture Industries in the 21st Century**

by Louis Roux



Dissertation presented for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, at Stellenbosch University

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Declaration

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December 2015

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Abstract

Utilising the works of Theodor W. Adorno (especially *Minima Moralia* (1951)) and other Critical Theorists, this dissertation examines and critiques contemporary cultural products, in search of cultural alternatives to the capital-driven ideologies and mythologies of the 'global village'. Through an exploration of everything from animal abuse in *Pokémon* to cell phone advertisements and African e-waste dumping sites, to social media and the growing political alienation/radicalisation of the youth, *Nihil Moralia* seeks to show that the most deeply reprehensible ideas of our society are the ones that are the most profligate, and perhaps the most deeply held. This wide-ranging yet deeply interconnected critique is made possible by the use of Adorno's aphoristic style and form, most clearly seen in *Minima Moralia*.

With the deep and apparently irreversible entrenchment of free market capitalism, with the ecological crisis looming large, and with workers suffering more than ever, I believe it is time to reinvestigate the questions that Adorno put to his contemporaries about culture, industry, progress and ethics, and to ask them again. I hope to illuminate – in some ways, negatively – some of our contemporary moral/ethical predicaments, and suggest that if we have any hope of surviving the century, we have to become a radically different society.

Opsomming

Deur die verkenning van Theodor W. Adorno (veral *Minima Moralia* (1951)) en ander Kritiese Teoriste se werk, beoordeel hierdie verhandeling kontemporêre kulturele produkte op soek na kulturele alternatiewe vir die kapitaal-gedrewe (kapitalisties-gedrewe) ideologieë en mitologieë van die 'geglobaliseerde' samelewing. Deur alles te ondersoek – vanaf dieremishandeling in *Pokémon*, tot selfoonadvertensies en die stortingsterreine vir e-afval in Afrika, tot sosiale media en die groeiende politiese vervreemding/radikalisasie van die jeug – wil *Nihil Moralia* toon dat die laakbaarste idees van ons sosiale samelewing dié is wat die mees wydverspreid en miskien die mees diepgeworteld is. Hierdie verrykende dog verbinde kritiek word moontlik gemaak deur die gebruik van Adorno se aforistiese styl en vorm, mees duidelik te sien in *Minima Moralia*.

Ek glo dat, met die diepgewortelde en klaarblyklik onomkeerbare verskansing van die vryemark-kapitalisme, die opdoemende ekologiese krisis en met werkers wat meer as ooit swaarkry, dit tyd is om Adorno se vrae wat hy aan sy tydgenote gestel het oor kultuur, industrie, vooruitgang en etiek te herondersoek en weer te vra. Ek hoop om – op 'n soms negatiewe wyse – party van ons hedendaagse morele/etiese vraagstukke te belig en om voor te stel dat, as ons enige hoop het om hierdie eeu te oorleef, die samelewing radikale verandering sal moet ondergaan.

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Dedication

vir E.

vir K.

vir S.

vir T.

en vir Moeder,

dankie.

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Introduction

Oh, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't, ah fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this.

- *Hamlet*, I:ii:129-138

Bunny Lebowski: Uli doesn't care about anything. He's a Nihilist.

The Dude: Ah, that must be exhausting.

- *The Big Lebowski*

Like Hamlet, many of us – the denizens of contemporary society – are struggling with the questions of meaning and purpose. And, like the Hamlet from Act One, we conclude that there is no meaning, no purpose, only vague and arbitrary laws and expectations (formed by God or society, which may end up being the same thing) that keep us on the beaten track of existence. Hamlet's ethical predicament is truly our own: the predicament of nihilism, and its consequent feelings of “fatigue, ennui, melancholy and above all boredom with life.”¹ In our contemporary situation, like in Hamlet's, and Nietzsche's, “[t]he aim is lacking: ‘why?’ finds no answer.”² But thousands of young Hamlets, those that are not paralyzed by existential dread, or have been pushed beyond it, those who have come finally to the decision to kill the king, take to the streets in Ukraine, Greece, Spain, Palestine, Venezuela, America, South Africa, almost everywhere it seems – too long have they withstood the whips and scorns of outrageous Fortune 500 companies and, filled with fear and anger, they take arms against a

¹ Bernstein, J.M. *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. p. 6.

² Nietzsche, F. *The Will to Power*. p. 9.

sea of troubles and try to tear down systems that are inherently corrupt and destructive. Whether they succeed, or end up as corpses in a final act blood bath remains to be seen.

To be, or not to be: that is a silly question. When one decides not to be there is nothing left to be said. If one answers ‘to be’, the immediate question that arises is ‘how?’ I believe we must start from the same point as Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that there is no inherent meaning to life and that we are all in a wasteland of nihilism in which life is merely the habit of living³. This attitude is, I believe, much more prominent today than it was even in Camus’ or Adorno’s time. I also propose that this is in fact a much happier proposition than one might think. Instead of simply having or finding meaning we must *create* it, by engaging in activities that are meaningful – or at least that have the potential to be meaning-making. By not seeing ourselves as bound to a pre-supposed meaning we gain authority over our own lives and a greater sense of freedom to break with ‘destiny’. Meaning is not within us, but in our interactions with each other and with the world around us.

We do not break with a teleological view of ourselves because, as Deborah Cook notes, “Western societies are demonic [to use Foucault’s phrase] because they have coercively shaped individuals and populations to such an extent that it is now extremely difficult to envisage any alternatives to existing forms of individuality and sociality. And, as Ransom [Foucault scholar] remarks, it is this individualization and totalization of subjects that impedes the emergence of political maturity.”⁴ The term demonic here is very telling: if we are autonomous beings it should stand to reason that we are free to create and shape our own subjectivities⁵ (what Foucault calls ‘self-fashioning’). So why do more people not engage, at least consciously and critically, in such a project? ‘Demonic’ society is demonic because, like the evil entities of superstition, its work is to implant thoughts or behaviours that are not our own, but that we accept as ‘natural’ or ‘spontaneous’, or at the very least ‘just the way things

³ Of course, the project of existential philosophy was very different from Adorno’s, or my own. They tended, perhaps, to ignore the historic, material realities – something that Adorno points out in ‘Why Still Philosophy’ (*Critical Models*), and never forgets to do himself. But I still believe that their formulation of existence as not having an *inherent* meaning (which is not the same as being completely meaningless) is a useful point to begin from.

⁴ Cook, Deborah. "Adorno, Foucault and critique." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (2013). p. 960.

⁵ “Technologies of the self [...] permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality,” according to Foucault in ‘Technologies of the Self,’ in: *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 1*. ed. Rabinow, P. Penguin: London. 1997.

are'. The demonic society, through incubus/succubus-like seduction, the promise of wealth, or coercion, appropriates the task of self-fashioning that should rightfully be each individual's subjective right,⁶ and at the same time erases its own traces by letting us believe that it is some intrinsic part of human nature. Adorno writes that "[i]deology by no means always takes the form of explicitly idealistic philosophy. It does its secret work within the very foundational construction of something affirmed as first or primary [...], which justifies the world as it is."⁷ Our work, then, is to be suspicious of all that appears to 'merely be', and to undo these societal machinations – both as critics and intellectuals, and more generally as human beings.

When Adorno states in his introduction to *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* that the purpose of his book is no less than the purpose of all good philosophy, "the teaching of the good life", a 'how to' guide to ethical living, he knows very well that this might be an impossible task.⁸ Jakob Norberg defines *Minima Moralia*, rather surprisingly, as advice literature, albeit advice literature of a different colour. The post-war German society, torn from its previous exceptionally harmful way of organizing society, was emerging from a self-imposed stupor and undergoing massive economic, political and social upheavals and its populace – having been taken in, seduced, or coerced into the Fascist system that stripped them of autonomy and subjectivity – had an increased demand for "books that offered guidance on social interaction, demeanor, and moral issues."⁹

Adorno's intervention in this field, as a German intellectual, would seem completely normal, even necessary – but, as Norberg notes, he "does not believe in the viability of advice. Whatever good suggestions the reader may find in *Minima Moralia*, it is framed by repeated, even obsessive, announcements of the end of the bourgeois era, as well as the demise of the self-determining subject, the projected recipient of advice"¹⁰ – confronted with the myriad horrors, absurdities, and banalities of modern society (that he feels is regressing into Fascist barbarism), this project of teaching ethics can no longer be a naively positivistic or prescriptive one – it must be carried out negatively; what to do can be found in the gaps of

⁶ Ransom, John S. *Foucault's Discipline: The Politics of Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press. 1997.

⁷ *Negative Dialectics*, p. 50.

⁸ pp. 15-18.

⁹ Norberg, Jakob. "Adorno's Advice: *Minima Moralia* and the Critique of Liberalism." (2011): 398-411.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

what *not* to do – “[t]he text does not abstain from the modality of advice so much as it seeks to show how any advice has become impossible.”¹¹ One can only speak of the world as it is (or as one sees it) and let the ‘advice’ be inferred from there. In Adorno’s inversion of the genre, self-help means to see that the Self is socially constructed, and thus to see that society must be changed if we can ever hope to help ourselves.

Though Adorno’s trademark negativity seems nihilistic, I believe that this way of looking at the world in fact reveals hopeful prospects that are to be found in the gaps of untruth. Andrew J. Douglas, in ‘Democratic Darkness and Adorno’s Redemptive Criticism’, argues that “Adorno’s characteristically pessimistic diagnoses of our modern condition – his claim that we find ourselves ‘in the face of despair’, caught in the throes of an arresting ‘totality’ of late capitalist exchange – can be understood as a kind of rhetorical strategy, a means of critical provocation that is constituted and sustained by a subsequent commitment to redemptive or alternative possibility.”¹² If Adorno’s work, then, is obscure, shocking, even depressing, it is only to awaken us, to remove us from our stupor, to enable us to find the solutions to problems we did not know we had. But where do we find the real-world examples and implications, and not get bogged down in the abstract theory that Adorno seems to disdain? As noted Adorno scholar and biographer Brian O’Connor says, “Adorno’s critical theory is an attempt to identify the damaging social influences at work in social phenomena [...] not only to explain the behaviour influencing operations of the totality, but to show, indeed, that those operations are objectionable,”¹³ a task that is extremely difficult, and getting more so all the time.

According to Ben Agger, the critical theorists, by necessity, deepened “Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism into the analysis of reification”, and eventually took it even deeper “in a more evolved stage of capitalism. Thus the Frankfurt theorists conceived domination as even more intractable than reification.”¹⁴ He continues: “Lukács and the critical theorists argue that ideology has been “routinized” [...] in everyday life through the various cultural discourses and practices that suggest the inevitability and thus the rationality of political

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Douglas, Andrew J. "Democratic darkness and Adorno's redemptive criticism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36.7 (2010): 821.

¹³ *Adorno*. pp. 44-51.

¹⁴ *Critical Social Theories*. p. 83.

conformity. Ideology in postmodern capitalism has become even more dispersed into the semiotics and discourses of everyday life.”¹⁵ Thus our experiences of alienation, whether social, political or personal, are not accidental by-products of living in the world of global late capitalism – the alienation, the reification, serve specific ideological goals: to keep us isolated and afraid and powerless to oppose the domination, to leave us unable to reach political maturity¹⁶ and resist, since we are always tired, always hungry, always wanting, always chasing what capitalism promises is just around the next corner – freedom from the system itself: ‘If I could just make enough money to get out of my job, my house, my country, my life, I could finally relax and *really live*’. Happiness is what capitalism consistently promises and consistently fails to deliver *on purpose*, in other words.

The purpose of this project is to look askance at the culture that pretends to be inevitable, and to reveal and potentially undo the symbolic network that justifies and propagates this culture. Cracks in the monolith are revealed through satire, exaggeration and sometimes counterintuitive analysis. In so doing both form and content can become critical tools. Things have only gotten worse since Adorno’s time. Andrew J. Douglas states that “[w]hile our own political present [...] pales in comparison to what [Walter] Benjamin must have experienced on his way to Port Bou in September 1940, there is a sense in which we may be gesturing back towards a kind of political darkness. [We have become] resigned in the face of something like a historical continuum of democratic demoralization and political apathy, plainly disillusioned with Marxian and other liberation narratives”.¹⁷ With the fall/corruption of communism the capitalist hegemony/heteronomy has spread to all corners of the globe, infiltrating almost every aspect of public *and* private life, and I am reminded of the Rammstein song, ‘Amerika’¹⁸ with its satirical, critical lament that “we’re all living in America” (which I will discuss in greater detail in an aphorism). If Adorno’s greatest fear was barbarism, what would he think of *Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo*, the show that follows (exploits?) the family of an obese child beauty pageant contestant (also to be discussed in greater detail), and the myriad similar ‘reality’ TV shows? If Auschwitz was the only possible outcome of modernity’s emphasis on progress, efficiency and automation, what are

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Adorno: “Politically mature is the person who speaks for himself, because he has thought for himself, and is not merely repeating someone else” (‘Critique’, in *Critical Models*, p. 281).

¹⁷ ‘Democratic Darkness’. p. 820.

¹⁸ See the music video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxroiTRg7Tg>

the labour camps in Saudi-Arabia¹⁹, the Nigerian oil fields²⁰, the dumping grounds for e-waste in Ghana²¹, the unsafe and immoral factories in Asia²², the internment camps in Israel²³, the rise of Nazis (though they may not call themselves that) in Greece²⁴ and elsewhere in Europe? If he was disgusted by the musical ‘degeneration’ evident in jazz²⁵, how would he react to Skrillex, or Flo Rida?

Throughout this project I draw your attention to the banal, the ignorant, and the ethically dubious and present you with my critiques of those artefacts or events, attempting to tease out the underlying ideological messages that they purposefully or accidentally contain. And it is important to do that if we are ever to reach an understanding of the culture industry as it works today. But, *equally importantly*, I also make it a point to spend some time with works that I feel are ‘good’ – pieces, like the [adult swim] *Infomercials*, that say something about our collective experience that we can learn from. Lest I be accused of elitism, let me say that many of the things I find worthwhile – the *Infomercials*, Welcome to Night Vale, the music of M.I.A. and Die Antwoord – are *firmly* in the realm of pop culture. Good art, thoughtful art, can be and *is* popular. The popularity of art that is autonomous (or at least relatively autonomous) shows that there is something in their iconoclasm, their critique of society, their doubt of the prevailing mythologies that resonates with many millions of people. Perhaps we are not yet completely Marcuse’s ‘one-dimensional’ person.

Another important problem to address is where the author/critic places himself in relation to what he critiques. There would seem to be only two choices: immanent, from inside, or transcendent, from outside. But Adorno shows that both are preposterous: “He speaks as if he represented either unadulterated nature or a higher historical age. Yet he is necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior,” he says of transcendent critic.²⁶

¹⁹ See: Abdul-Ahab, Gaith. ‘Inside Dubai’s Labour Camps’: <http://www.theguardian.com/global/gallery/2008/oct/08/1>

²⁰ See: Vice on HBO. Episode 9: Gangs and Oil: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01Xa2oKKVR0#t=866>

²¹ See: Reid, David. ‘Making a living from toxic electronic waste in Ghana’, *BBC Click*: <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-26239741>

²² See: Qiang, Li. ‘Beyond Foxconn: Deplorable working conditions characterize Apple’s entire supply chain’: <https://www.chinalaborwatch.org/pro/proshow-176.html>

²³ See: Kane, Alex. ‘Journalist David Sheen delivers blistering indictment on Israel’s racist war on African migrants’: <http://mondoweiss.net/2014/03/journalist-blistering-indictment.html>

²⁴ See: Vice on HBO. Episode 4: Love and Rockets: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEk5-MAKIHE#t=711>

²⁵ “The resulting enigma that millions of people seem never to tire of its monotonous attraction” (Adorno, ‘Perennial Fashion – Jazz’, in *Prisms*, p. 121).

²⁶ ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’. p. 19.

“It is dragged into the abyss by its object. The materialistic transparency of culture has not made it more honest, only more vulgar,” he says of immanent critique.²⁷ So where is there left to go, one might ask. Adorno, in my view, finds the perfect answer in his authorial persona – that of the curmudgeonly old man (many casual readers have noted this tone in *Minima Moralia*²⁸). What this tone does is to give the impression of a person of society, but not in it; a person in society, but not of it. Again there is a gap here, one that does not want to be closed. After all, “the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass”²⁹ – not denying, but still being critical of, one’s own implication in the systems of contemporary life can open doors to previously unseen critical possibilities.

For Adorno gaps are all-important. In a letter to Walter Benjamin he posits that “both high art as well as industrially produced consumer art ‘bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change. *Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up.*”³⁰ It seems then that the freedom that we seek from the all-encompassing capitalist machinery lies not in the works of art, nor in social conditions or praxes, nor in what we say of them, but somewhere in between, between the fragments. For Adorno, somewhere between Hollywood and Auschwitz; for us, perhaps it is somewhere between Apple HQ and Asian sweatshops, between America and Russia, between Sharpeville and The Rainbow Nation and Marikana.

I have chosen the form of the aphorism for two reasons. Firstly, as a sort of homage to some of my favourite thinkers that have employed the style to great effect – Nietzsche, Debord, Barthes, Baudrillard, and of course Adorno himself. I find also in the writing of the abovementioned a resistance to easy interpretation – the meaning does not jump straight out, and the formal aspects of the language becomes a part of its message. Sherry Weber Nicholson writes that “Adorno’s writing verges in some sense on an artificial, constructed language, a *Kunstsprache*, which sounds “the same” throughout his writing. But at the same time it constantly violates expectations, that is, disrupting patterns of thought and their verbal equivalents, and it does so without explanation.”³¹ I have attempted in my own small way,

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 34.

²⁸ See: http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/201388.Minima_Moralia

²⁹ *Minima Moralia*. p. 50.

³⁰ In Bernstein, p. 2, my emphasis.

³¹ Adorno, Theodor W. ‘Introduction.’ *Notes to literature. Vol. 1.* Columbia University Press, 1992. p. v.

and within the limits of reason, to subvert expectation or resist meaning here and there in the project and I hope I can be forgiven a few instances of obscurity.

Secondly, and more importantly, the aphorism is a powerful form to use today because it so accurately mirrors the fractured, condensed, high speed experience of daily life. Which is not to say that it cannot be an effective critical tool – it is exactly because of its tenuous grip on continuity and the non-linearity that goes with it that allows the aphorism to be used in an exploration of something as complex as contemporary culture. It also becomes an active resistance to homogenization and reification – celebrating the unique eternal moment of the moment in eternity.

The aphoristic structure of *Minima Moralia*, then, becomes more than a stylistic choice – it reflects the damaged life of the subtitle. The aphorisms of *Minima Moralia* spring out at seemingly random locations, no single one being more important than the other. What are at stake here are the places *between* aphorisms, between single parts of aphorisms, between fragments: The lines that connect points and nodes that create a more complex picture than could be achieved through positivistic, instrumental reasoning. Adorno argues, in ‘The Essay as Form’ that “[t]he usual reproach against the essay, that it is fragmentary and random, itself assumes the givenness of totality and thereby the identity of subject and object, and it suggests that man is in control of totality. But the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal.”³² The critic of the essay here wants the true totality of the essay (with its inherent contradictions, slippages, and self-critiques) to become the servant of the false totality (totalitarianism) of society, in which dissent has been smoothed over completely. If every aphorism, then, is a small essayistic ‘constellation’ – a picture formed from seemingly disparate points – the book in which they are contained also becomes a constellation, or even a multiplicity of constellations – depending on what aphorisms are read, and in what order: constellations that are themselves parts of larger constellations, and through this technique we can critique and resist the ever-expanding heteronomy.³³

³² ‘The Essay as Form’. p. 159.

³³ Which, according to Adorno, is no less than the necessity of philosophy “from time immemorial” (*Critical Models* p. 10).

Adorno defends the fragmentary nature of the essay, saying that “it [the essay] thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.”³⁴ As J.M. Bernstein says in his introduction to *The Culture Industry*, “Fragmentary writing is premised on the refusal of the operations that establish ‘rational’ connections between statements in theoretical discourse [...] fragmentary writing does not pretend to empirical accuracy [...] Through the multiplication of diverse perspectives a complex portrait of the phenomenon in question is produced”.³⁵ Adorno knows that “knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through the dense, firmly-founded but by no means uniformly transparent medium of experience.”³⁶ The essay, or the aphorism, does not pretend to be completely rational, mathematical, or ‘scientific’ – its very form exposes both the world, and the way we think about it. Thoughts do not come to us logically and well-formulated, and in that way the essay *shows* the process of thinking by working through the process instead of presenting the sterile ‘conclusion’ to thought. So it is here then, in the gaps, the lines of interaction, that his “prose radiates the promise of happiness beyond catastrophe – a happiness which the total system, to this day, denies its constituent members, simply because it *is* the catastrophe”³⁷ – with this fragmentary, essayistic mode of thinking that emphasises disjunction and contradiction we can find and explore the cracks in the systems of total administration and discipline, and perhaps widen those cracks and destroy the entire edifice. Adorno wrote that “Marx believed that the possibility of changing the world from top to bottom was immediately present, here and now. Only stubbornness could still maintain this thesis *as Marx formulated it*”³⁸. Perhaps we just have to change the direction of Marx’s formulation, and begin from the bottom...

Using both serious world news events as well as supposedly empty or irrelevant pop-cultural phenomenon is not an accidental choice – I, like Judith Halberstam, “believe in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant; I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 164.

³⁵ ‘Introduction’. p. 8.

³⁶ *Minima Moralia*. p. 80.

³⁷ Redmond. p. 1.

³⁸ ‘Why Still Philosophy?’ p. 14, my emphasis.

widely.”³⁹ According to Halberstam, “[l]ow theory tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop. But it also makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal”⁴⁰. Even ‘worthless’ cultural products can help us think worthwhile thoughts. I do not wish to win anyone’s agreement, though – I am not a lawyer stating a case. Raymond Geuss affirms Adorno’s view that “traditional academic philosophers seek to convince others of the rightness of their views by presenting logically irrefutable arguments. The coerciveness of this project, even if it is a highly sublimated form of coerciveness, is part of the general obsession with control that is characteristic of the Enlightenment.”⁴¹ Adorno works in opposition to this tradition, says Geuss; that “[t]he micro-treatises that constitute *Minima Moralia* are supposed to be series of images, suppositions, insights, even “arguments” (of a kind), etc., *that do not demand agreement but which have other kinds of plausibility.*”⁴² This plausibility might be bound up with the notion of failure – a failure on the part of Adorno, as well as Benjamin, to be properly analytical, to give clear and concise answers and definitions. It is also the failure to be happy or content with ‘the way things are’, the command that is constantly being barked at us from billboards and magazines and television⁴³. But if “wrong life cannot be lived rightly”⁴⁴, if a life that is lived with unconscious and unexamined obedience cannot be a moral life, is this failure not in some sense a great triumph, or at least a worthwhile rebellion? “It is a part of morality not to feel at home with oneself,” says Geuss (paraphrasing Adorno⁴⁵), and “one’s first reaction to public success, at any rate *in a society like ours*, should be that it is something too disgraceful to bear, and indeed apparent success of any kind is to be treated with great suspicion” [emphasis added].⁴⁶ By not ascribing to dominant systems of thought – thereby ‘failing’ – by using language and structure that are sometimes confusing, sometimes surreal, sometimes poetic (even lyrical, in the case of Benjamin) these writers push back against a wrong life not only in their content, but also in

³⁹ *The Queer Art of Failure*. p. 21.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p. 3.

⁴¹ ‘Adorno’s Gaps’, p. 163.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴³ See, for instance, this commercial for the anti-depressant Prozac

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of22ROQxvn8>), or think of the Coke slogans with their injunctions to ‘Open Happiness’ and ‘Enjoy’, or the viral Pharrell Williams hit ‘Happy’

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6Sxv-sUYtM>) which tells us to “clap along if you feel that Happiness is the Truth”. All of which implies that if you are unhappy or angry there is something deeply and fundamentally *wrong* with *you*, and not with the world you are living in.

⁴⁴ *Minima Moralia*. p. 36.

⁴⁵ “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (*MM*, p. 39).

⁴⁶ ‘Adorno’s Gaps’. p. 164.

their form and style; “[t]heir very rejection of the guilt of a life which blindly reproduces itself, their insistence on independence and autonomy, on separation from the prevailing realm of purposes, implies, at least as an unconscious element, the promise of a condition in which freedom were realized”.⁴⁷ They even sometimes speak in the voices of prophets (as Nietzsche was also wont to do) and make many references to the ‘Messianic’, the return of the Messiah (or his arrival, depending on perspective). This might seem quite out of place at first, but their Messiah is not the Biblical one, but rather an end to history, which is truly a history of tragedy, the history of class struggle.⁴⁸ A strangely utopian thought for these intellectuals – Adorno notes that fascists have used the idea of religious salvation to repress their people and to justify their means,⁴⁹ but Adorno’s and Benjamin’s Messiah is not a religious one, but a historical one – which is not to say that they ascribed to a teleological idea of history: “the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic, it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end”.⁵⁰ It is the light that shines from the future that might illuminate the present, the wind that blows the Angel of History ever onward.⁵¹ As Adorno says in the very last aphorism of *Minima Moralia*: “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption,” even if that redemption is in reality impossible – a leap of imaginary faith.⁵²

Adorno’s own words, in *Critical Models*, ring true: “Critique is essential to all democracy. Not only does democracy require the freedom to criticize and need critical impulses. Democracy is nothing less than defined by critique,”⁵³ again evoking the idea of a totality that can only be complete with the inclusion without judgement of contradictions. So the focus of this project, its task, is not to answer the old Communist question ‘what is to be done?’ in any dogmatically ‘practical’ sense – I believe that any real, radical, redemptive praxis can only happen once we *change our minds*. I would like to echo Louis Althusser in his critique of the May ’68 slogan ‘Get rid of the cop in your head!’, which he replaces with a more complex, but more accurate, formulation of the fight against oppressive and repressive ideologies and systems: “Fight false ideas, destroy the false ideas you have in your head – the false ideas

⁴⁷ Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, in *Prisms*, p. 23.

⁴⁸ Benjamin, W. ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’, in *Reflections*, p. 313.

⁴⁹ Adorno, ‘Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda’, in *The Culture Industry*, p. 137-138.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’, in *Reflections*, p. 313.

⁵¹ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, p. 257.

⁵² *Minima Moralia*, p. 247.

⁵³ *Critical Models*. p. 281

with which the ideology of the dominant class pulls the wool over your eyes, and replace them with accurate ideas that will enable you to join the revolutionary class's struggle to end exploitation and the repression that sustains it!"⁵⁴ This does not mean that the 'masses' are what conspiracy theorists refer to as 'sheeple'. In the age of Google it is easier than ever to do some research and find the gaps in the dominant ideology. We can very easily see through lies but choose to ignore this knowledge. Robert Pfaller, working with Žižek's analysis of 'canned laughter' in comedy TV, states that "Žižek drew the conclusion that our supposedly most intimate feelings can be transferred or delegated to others. Our feelings and convictions are therefore not internal, but rather can lead an external, 'objective' existence: a television sitcom can laugh for me; weepers can mourn in my place; a Tibetan prayer wheel can pray for me; and a mythical being, such as the renowned 'ordinary man in the street', can take my place and be convinced of things that I cannot take seriously."⁵⁵ It is, in the end, easier to pretend to believe in things that pretend to be true, than to actively try to change what seems immutable. This of course is not accidental: "something is provided for everyone so that no one may escape", as Adorno and Horkheimer wrote.⁵⁶ It is exactly this stupefaction that leads to the worst kind of contemporary nihilism: the passive sense of meaninglessness and ennui that manifests as hedonism or hermitage, and forecloses the possibility of radical change.

We cannot afford to brush aside 'mass culture' as unworthy of our academic, critical attention. Even though "[t]he cultural commodities of the industry are governed [...] by the principal of their realization as value, and not by their own specific content and harmonious formation"⁵⁷, we know that the industry is an ideology-machine constantly producing and reproducing the conditions of its own survival, built on the assumption that we do not know any better and that it can never change, since "conformity has replaced consciousness"⁵⁸; a machine that does its best to keep us away from political and historical maturity "almost without a gap".⁵⁹ It is exactly in these gaps that we can learn what *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs 2* might tell us about genetically manipulated food, what *Pokémon* might tell us about 'eco-terrorism', what *Jersey Shore* might tell us about sexuality. If the culture industry, along with church and state, is one of the largest producers of ideology and heteronomy, by sifting through the cultural detritus of contemporary life, by engaging with, and not merely

⁵⁴ *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. p. 231.

⁵⁵ Pfaller, R. *On the Pleasure Principal in Culture*, p. 17.

⁵⁶ 'The Culture Industry'. p. 43.

⁵⁷ Adorno, T. 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', in *The Culture Industry*, p. 99.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p. 104.

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 98. My emphasis.

looking at, but *looking with and through* products of culture and society (most of which seem at first glance to be completely vapid and devoid of meaning), we must be able to escape the wilderness of the nihilism that contemporary systems of discipline create, even if it is through the negative space left by the fragmentation and alienation of society⁶⁰, and – hopefully – “[h]aving started from an anguished awareness of the inhuman, the meditation on the absurd returns at the end of its itinerary to the very heart of the passionate flames of human revolt”,⁶¹ so that we can accomplish “the insoluble task [:] to let neither the power of others or our own powerlessness stupefy us.”⁶²

⁶⁰ “Because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite” (*MM*, p. 247).

⁶¹ Camus. p. 55.

⁶² *Minima Moralia*. p. 57.

Nihil Moralia

Walking the talk –

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the young academic to be simultaneously intellectually rigorous and ethically rigorous. Confronted with (and tested on our knowledge of) all the research around race, sex, gender, animal rights, ecological crises, the horrors of capitalism, the horrors of communism, poverty, and violence the young intellectual who wishes to practice what s/he preaches is caught in a catch 22 of responsibility. It becomes impossible to eat a steak, drive a car, listen to the radio, or watch a movie and enjoy it without a guilty conscience. Every once-enjoyable activity becomes an exercise in denial or irony. One must, in the words of Adorno “deny oneself the ideological misuse of one’s own existence, and for the rest conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively and unpretentiously as is required, no longer by good upbringing, but by the shame of still having air to breathe, in hell”.⁶³

Is this truly the only choice we have? This nihilistic standstill of ethical responsibility? Research done since Adorno makes this impossible. The only real options left are these: either abandon all intellectual pursuits and live comfortably in denial; or, in any way possible, try to relieve the conditions in hell.

Amerika –

Rammstein’s song ‘Amerika’, while perhaps not a very subtle or nuanced critique, does make one extremely salient point: “We’re all living in America”. The official video for the song might in fact be the clearest expression of this sentiment⁶⁴. We see an African village enjoying a pizza, young Buddhist monks eating Burger King, a Muslim man taking off his Nike shoes before praying (near what looks like an oil refinery), an Indian man smoking Lucky Strikes, and a Japanese youth dressed in Rockabilly style on a Harley Davidson. The central image of the video is that of the band performing the song on the moon in a spoof of the Apollo moon landing. This shows that the chief export of America is not its consumer goods, but its consumer culture, and as Julia Galeota says, “the dissemination of ostensibly

⁶³ Adorno, Theodor W. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a damaged life*. Verso, 2005. p. 28.

⁶⁴ Available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPuKWY0_cJ0

American principles, such as freedom and democracy.”⁶⁵ Perhaps we should say instead ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, since the American corporation seems only interested in freedom if it is that of the free market, and democracy only applies if it is to the benefit of corporate interests. But of course “[c]orporations don’t harbor qualms about the detrimental effects of ‘Americanization’ on foreign cultures, as most corporations have ostensibly convinced themselves that American culture is superior and therefore its influence is beneficial to other, “lesser” cultures.”⁶⁶

This is the truth of global culture: we watch American films in our cinemas and American shows on our televisions, we listen to American songs on our American iPods, we wear American brands and eat American food. I am typing this in an American word processor on an American laptop and I can see what I’m writing thanks to my American glasses. There is almost no escape from the homogenized, globalized American cultural empire. There is no need for America to invade, to conquer, to colonise. They merely need to build a McDonald’s, or release the latest *Transformers* film – these are the real foot soldiers and emissaries of the USA. According to Naomi Klein, in *No Logo*, they achieve this by selling the very idea of diversity, through making their products one-size-fits-all:

As culture becomes increasingly homogenized globally, the task of marketing is to stave off the nightmare moment when branded products cease to look like lifestyles or grand ideas and suddenly appear as the ubiquitous goods they really are. In its liquid ethnicity, marketing masala has been introduced as the antidote to this horror of cultural homogeneity. By embodying corporate identities that are radically individualistic and perpetually new, the brands attempt to inoculate themselves against accusations that they are in fact selling sameness.⁶⁷

There is a Dylan Moran joke that I feel quite accurately satirizes American cultural hegemony: “What America does is it has a nosy in some place, some war-torn, and fucked up place and it looks for oil or chocolate or whatever it wants. And all the indigenous people obviously get pissed off, and they begin to meet, they begin to foment. They ring each other

⁶⁵ ‘Cultural Imperialism: An American Tradition.’ p. 22.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Klein, Naomi. *No Logo (tenth anniversary edition)*. London: Fourth Estate. 2010. p. 117-118

up and say: “You, Habuwa, let’s meet and foment at six o’clock.” In the local bombed-out cafe, they gather round and they say: “What are we gonna do about the fucking imperialistic Yankee pig dog? What are we gonna do? They come in here they fucking they look around, they take our stuff. What’re we gonna do?” And what America does while these people are talking is they very, very gradually build a Starbucks around them. And then, they all become addicted to latte and they lose the will to rebel.”⁶⁸ One only has to think of the reaction in South Africa when Burger King announced that they would soon be opening an outlet in Cape Town. People queued for hours to purchase a burger⁶⁹ that is in no way significantly different to any other fast food burger. The Cape Town flagship location made a R5,000,000 turnover in the first seven weeks.⁷⁰ McDonald’s *or* Burger King? Free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last.

That is why many of the aphorisms in this project are directed at or through products of American culture – they are not specific to the geological space of the United States of America, they permeate almost every life on the planet. We are all indeed living in America.

Addendum: We have recently learned that another of America’s chief exports is torture, or ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’, as revealed by the ‘Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program’⁷¹, known as the Torture Report. From this we know that the use of torture has been underreported, that reports of useful knowledge generated by the process have been greatly exaggerated⁷², and basically that the CIA is guilty of gross human rights violations⁷³.

We also learned that there are 54 countries⁷⁴ around the globe complicit in the CIA’s mission to rid the (Western) world of terrorism by drowning people in secret dungeons. One of the countries that facilitated CIA torture is South Africa. Considering our history, one might think that SA would be more than a little adverse to hosting a ‘detention facility’ (or ‘black

⁶⁸ Moran, Dylan. *Monster*. Universal Pictures. 2004.

⁶⁹ As seen in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQuHgZxTvso>

⁷⁰ <http://mattr.biz/articles/72/how-burger-king-conquered-cape-town>

⁷¹ The entire 528 page report is available here, albeit rather heavily redacted:

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/12/09/world/cia-torture-report-document.html>

⁷² http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/12/09/world/cia-torture-report-key-points.html?_r=0

⁷³ A breakdown of some of the more heinous ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’:

<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/09/cia-torture-report-worst-findings-waterboard-rectal>; and a

somewhat more sensationalist version: <http://www.vox.com/2014/12/9/7360823/cia-torture-roundup>

⁷⁴ You can find a map of complicit countries here: <http://www.vox.com/2014/12/9/7361291/map-cia>

site'), but that very well might have been the case⁷⁵ (the exact extent of our involvement is still unknown, and will probably stay that way for the foreseeable future). The title of the Open Society Foundations' independent report says it most succinctly: America has succeeded in *Globalizing Torture*.⁷⁶

Obsolete obsolescence –

Adorno argues, in *Minima Moralia*, for the use of obsolete items, fashions and modes of production, as Joel Burges shows in his essay 'Adorno's Mimeograph'. The point being made is that "anachronism becomes the refuge of modernity"⁷⁷, where the creative or the intellectual can escape from the "horror of becoming obsolete, of turning into a passé person" (Burges 65), and at the same time offers an escape from a consumer society where everything must be new, or at least novel.

Our contemporary cultural context problematises this idea – obsolescence has become extremely fashionable. So-called 'hipster' culture (itself a name pilfered from an earlier subculture) has infiltrated the mainstream to a point where it can no longer be considered a sub- or counterculture. Shops like Typo and Cotton On spring up all over the country selling mass-produced retro at exorbitant prices. Thrift shopping has become a 'cool' cultural statement rather than a rebellious one (see 'Thrift Shop' by Macklemore). One of the most conspicuous objects of this cultural statement is the USB Typewriter for iPad⁷⁸. For the low, low price of \$699 you can own a typewriter replica that acts as a keyboard for your tablet device – simultaneously giving you an air of nostalgic/ironic sophistication and completely defeating the entire purpose of your iPad. At the same time you can download the Hanx Writer app (developed by none other than Tom Hanks himself) to make realistic typewriter noises⁷⁹ while you type. Of course these keyboards and apps come with modern functionality – the ability to delete, copy-paste, change font size, and so on – telling us that the people who purchase these products are not in fact interested in typing on a typewriter, but rather in looking like they are typing on a typewriter. "To see them as renegades is to assess them too

⁷⁵ One of the few articles in South African media to address the question:

<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/CIA-may-have-paid-SA-lump-sum-for-torture-centres-20141212>

⁷⁶ The full report is available here: <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/globalizing-torture-20120205.pdf>

⁷⁷ *Minima Moralia*, p. 221.

⁷⁸ Available here: <http://www.usbtypewriter.com/collections/typewriters>

⁷⁹ Available here: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/hanx-writer/id868326899?mt=8>

high; they mask mediocre faces with horn-rimmed spectacles betokening ‘brilliance’, though with plain-glass lenses, solely in order to better themselves in their own eyes and in the general rat-race,” said Adorno of these kinds of consumers⁸⁰ (incidentally, horn-rimmed glasses without lenses are also part of the hipster wardrobe today). The refuge from the mainstream Adorno urged us to seek has *become* the mainstream itself.

Where are we to seek refuge now? The culture industry is no longer directly hegemonic, but rather caters to almost every niche and subculture, therefore enfolding them into itself. The industry has realised that it does not need to defeat the Different, but merely to embrace them – after all, it *is* a previously untapped market demographic.

Of desks and doorways –

In episode four of the HBO series *The Wire* we see an officer trying to move a desk through a doorway, but it has somehow gotten stuck. His partner goes around to the other side to help him, and it still won’t budge. Eventually almost the entire squad, including the lead detective, is wrestling with the desk. Panting from exertion, they pause. The first officer bemoans: “At this rate we’re never gonna get it in.” The others look up, confused, “IN?”

This is the perfect visual metaphor for bumbling, inefficient bureaucracies – not just in the Baltimore Police Department that the show portrays, but all over the world. A desk is somehow stuck in a door, and the officials of the state have no idea how to get it out, or even where it is supposed to go. This is a much scarier thought than the conspiracy theories about governments – the idea that they know as little, or less, than we do but are still in control of the bewilderingly complex systems of control of which they are ignorant. When Bill Hicks asks in his show *Revelations* why the [US] government doesn’t use its defence budget to clothe, feed and educate the poor, the answer is simple. It is not because the governments of the world are peopled with evil, scheming Machiavellians (at least, not exclusively), it is because they have no idea what they are doing.

They are just as much Kafka characters as we are.

⁸⁰ *Minima Moralia*, p. 207.

We are all familiar with the characterisation of Kafka's protagonists as hopelessly at sea in a difficult and impenetrable world of bureaucrats and lawmakers, but we seldom think of these functionaries of the state as equally confused and helpless. Walter Benjamin notes that "[t]he world of offices and registries, of musty, shabby, dark rooms, is Kafka's world. [...] Potemkin, who vegetates, somnolent and unkempt, in a remote, inaccessible room, is an ancestor of those holders of power in Kafka's works who live in the attics as judges or in the castle as secretaries; no matter how highly placed they may be, they are always fallen or falling men, although even the lowest and seediest of them, the doorkeepers and the decrepit officials, may abruptly and strikingly appear in the fullness of their power."⁸¹ It is not difficult to imagine that the administrators and pencil-pushers in Kafka are just normal men who are almost arbitrarily invested with power by the structural force of The Law. If the same holds true for our own rulers we must let go of the idea that we can solve the problems of our nation or world by just voting for a new, less corrupt leadership – the problem is not with the individuals, but with the system in which they must be embroiled if they hope to be elected. If they were not ethically dubious before, they quickly become so by mere association with prevailing forms of governance.

Congratulations to us –

The reality show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is one of a rare breed. Featuring an almost surreally enthused group of designers and builders and thousands of community volunteers all coming together to revamp (rebuild) the house of some tragically misfortunate family, it seems that there is very little negative commentary to be made about the show – it's premise ultimately being one of altruism, of people pulling together to help other people.

But who is really being helped by the show? The answer seems obvious when we see the tears of joy springing from the family and our own eyes begin to water and we cathartically sigh that something *good* has been done for a change.

There is a reason, though, that the show never revisits old projects to check how the families are doing. The ten year old boy who got the racing car themed room is now sixteen and too embarrassed to show his friends his room. The six year old princess no longer fits into her

⁸¹ Benjamin, Walter. 'Franz Kafka, on the Tenth Anniversary of his Death,' in: *Illuminations*. Schocken Books: New York. 2007.

adorable miniature four-poster bed, and the entire family has long since lost interest in the novelty staircase-slide combo. The fact of these ridiculously excessive and temporary renovations is, of course, not the only ethical problem with the show. Due to a huge increase in square footage, heating, cooling, and other gizmos, property taxes and utilities bills shoot through the roof and families (who were, you will remember, in dire straits to begin with) can no longer afford to live in their homes because the design team thought it would be cute and heart-warming to give a family a movie theatre and fairground carousel⁸².

This makes it clear that *EM:HE* is indeed about helping people – but not in the way that we thought. It is about helping the people in the production company make revenue, and about helping us, the audience, feel good about ourselves, and very little else.

Amerika? –

Perhaps it is too easy to say that we all live in America. There must exist, of course, an African agency in the globalised world – surely we do not take at face value each and every cultural product flung at us from across the Atlantic. Though it is clear that we have all been greatly influenced by American culture, it is certainly not a monolithic hegemony and we can (and do) respond, reshape, and repurpose. Lyombe Eko argues in his essay ‘Jerry Springer and the Marlboro Man in Africa: Globalisation and cultural eclecticism’ that “[f]or thousands of years, African cultures have resisted attempts to eradicate them by practicing cultural eclecticism. [...] African cultural resistance through adaptation of a superficial protective resemblance to the languages and cultures of colonialists and neo-colonialists does not necessarily amount to cultural hegemony.”⁸³

This position, of being simultaneously inside and outside, allows African cultural products to respond to America in critical and nuanced ways that might not have been possible from entirely within or entirely without. A perfect example of this might be the cultural eclecticism of the South African rap-rave group Die Antwoord. Ninja (Watkin Jones), Yo-Landi Vi\$\$er (Anri du Toit), and DJ Hi-Tek (Justin de Nobrega) burst onto the scene in 2009 with their

⁸² <http://chronicle.augusta.com/latest-news/2012-07-27/savannah-extreme-makeover-house-sale>; http://www.azcentral.com/community/gilbert/articles/20121030gilbert-extreme-makeover-house-auction.html?nclick_check=1; <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/may/13/business/fi-extreme13>.

⁸³ Eko, Lyombe. "Jerry Springer and the Marlboro Man in Africa: globalisation and cultural eclecticism." *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 22.1 (2001): 25-40.

first hit ‘Enter the Ninja’ – prefaced in the video⁸⁴ by ‘Whatever Man’, a short statement of radical multiculturalism: “Check it. I represent South African culture. In this place you get a lot of different things. Blacks. Whites. Coloureds. English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, watokal [whatever]. I’m, like, all these different things, all these different people, fucked into one person.” What Ninja doesn’t say, but is implied, is that he is also American, also European, and also Japanese. He is completely capable of crossing cultural and geographical boundaries at will – and this is in a large part made possible by the internet. They are, as they put it, “all up in the interwebz” and their initial success came from the virality of their first video.

It is also interesting to consider their aesthetic. Their look, especially in their first two albums, is heavily influenced by photographer Roger Ballen. Ballen, an American, is most famous for exploring the seedy underbelly of South African small town life. Die Antwoord then took his aesthetic of a dark South Africa and sold it back to America to great critical and popular acclaim. Playing a large part in their popular appeal is that they ‘fuck together’ elements of ‘high’ art (Ballen’s photography, the haute couture fashion of Alexander Wang, the films of Harmony Korine), ‘mainstream’ culture (the ‘bling’ of commercial hip-hop, the films of Neil Blomkamp, *The Matrix*), and the truly marginal (the poor-white culture referred to as ‘zef’, the culture of the predominantly coloured Number prison gangs, the Fanagalo of mainly Zulu mine workers, uncircumcised Xhosa men, the mentally disabled and disturbed). Their aesthetic is raw – a chaotic mash-up of many different cultures that come together to form something wholly innovative yet internationally popular. This is the case with their first two albums, *\$0\$* (2009) and *Ten\$ion* (2012). With *Donker Mag* (2014) they seem to have lost a lot of what made them so special and important. It is impossible to say for sure, but it seems like the decline in the quality of their work corresponds to a period in which they spent much less time in South Africa collaborating with South African artists. Though they still refer to themselves as outsider figures, the violence of cultural juxtaposition that allowed them to be a revolutionary force in popular music is mostly gone.

Every time I emerge –

Jersey Shore is a ‘reality’ show that depicts binge drinking and gym sessions in equal measure, oompa loompahs with pituitary gland disorders, casual sex and casual sexism, and something called a ‘Snooki’.

⁸⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wc3f4xU_FfQ

These characters go about their daily lives, drinking, tanning, sleeping with each other and selling t-shirts emblazoned with their names and catchphrases while millions of us watch. The only thing that the women seem to be capable of speaking about is men. In this way they are very similar to the men, since they constantly talk about themselves. The women's only purpose seems to be the sexual fulfilment of men. They rather romantically refer to sex as 'shmush'.

The real problem is not what they are doing – they are adults with free will. The problem is that the culture industry, in marketing and selling them, is influencing the social sphere negatively – making their kind of irresponsible and moronic behaviour normal, even glamorized.⁸⁵

To paraphrase Adorno: Every time the credits roll, despite our vigilance, the world emerges stupider and worse.

The Pokémon Liberation Front –

Since its start in 1997 the villains in the *Pokémon* game franchise have been Team Rocket. Team Rocket uses Pokémon in 'bad' ways – to rob stores and banks, to attack humans, and other acts of general mayhem. They are a sort of terrorist group, and like real terrorists, are ideologically unambiguous. The Team Rocket 'grunts', before a battle, say such charmingly evil things like "It's fun making Pokémon do bad things!" They are the 'evil' ones the morally 'good' player must battle, and who they must eventually defeat. That has always been the standard obviously-good vs. obviously-evil formula.

But in 2009, in the *Pokémon Black* game, there is a new villainous organization: Team Plasma. Their mission, according to their leader, is to free Pokémon from bondage, and to liberate them from the whims of trainers who force them to battle each other. In this way they are similar to the Animal Liberation Front, and thus an eco-terrorist group. Morally, a whole new dimension to the games emerges. Its veneer of fantasy begins to break down and where

⁸⁵ O'Connor, Brian. *Adorno*. New York: Routledge, 2013. pp. 176-179.

there used to be action packed battles between trainers, there emerges a picture of dogfights and animal testing.

Like their real-life counterparts, Team Plasma is morally ambiguous: they disrupt the societal status quo, but for ostensibly good reasons. The player, implicitly, is invited to question their own complicity in a system of Pokémon (animal) abuse. But, of course, the game cannot admit this in the ideological binary of good/evil that it requires to function. Just like the term ‘eco-terrorist’ was invented and applied to groups like the Earth Liberation Front and the Animal Liberation Front to make them, in the minds of the population, evil, Team Plasma must be evil in their rhetoric and actions to make us comfortable with thwarting and destroying their cause. That is why we get, in the very last part of the game, the twist that the Team Plasma leader was in fact just trying to get all the Pokémon for himself to become an unstoppable warlord, having duped all his followers with high-minded rhetoric about Pokémon (animal) rights.

The player defeats him and the world is restored with the Pokémon in their rightful place, but we must ask why the Team Plasma grunts who genuinely believed in the ideals that their leader espoused (albeit falsely) would not continue the fight. It is akin to the argument that conservatives and liberals alike make against Marxism: just look at Stalin – an argument neatly debunked by Terry Eagleton in *Why Marx was Right* (2011); a twisted caricature of a liberation movement does not negate the validity of that ideal, “[i]n fact, there is a paradoxical sense in which Stalinism, rather than discrediting Marx’s work, bears witness to its validity,”⁸⁶ since it shows just how much work there is to be done. I believe the same argument can be made here – it would have been much more interesting if the protagonist of the game was convinced by the rhetoric of Pokémon liberation but had to defeat the corrupt leader to save the movement. Questions of ethics, though, seem to be outside of the scope of this game and in order to be satisfied with its ending the player has to be convinced or has to convince him/herself that the antagonists are in fact hard-hearted terrorists, and that the status quo is worth restoring.

⁸⁶ *Why Marx was Right*, p. 21.

The Flying Dutchman –

The Hummer, the civilian version of the US Army Humvee, is one of the most excessive objects capitalism has produced so far⁸⁷. There is no reason for any ordinary person to own one of these vehicles – their price, size, and awful fuel efficiency makes them almost useless. The only reason to buy a Hummer is for ideological reasons – the machismo, the ‘patriotism’. It should come as no surprise that Arnold Schwarzenegger was one of the first private citizens to own one of these machines – just as Arnold is not a real soldier but has made a career pretending to be one (and one might say that he also ‘pretended’ to be a governor), the Hummer is not a real combat vehicle but pretends to be one⁸⁸.

Even though the Hummer is such a massive object, it is paradoxically almost non-existent: it is pure conspicuous consumption, pure ideology, pure excess – as exemplified in its own hyperbole, the Hummer Limo; it is a completely meaningless object, a spectre of capitalism that takes up too much space.

Sloganeering –

I remember the exact moment I became politically aware. My mother and I were driving from Johannesburg to Koedoeskop, where my uncle lived as a farmer. Driving past Diepsloot, one of the largest informal settlements in South Africa, I saw a huge billboard towering out above the shacks; emblazoned with Thabo Mbeki’s kindly, smiling face, stating simply “ANC: WE BUILD HOUSES”. The jarring juxtaposition between the political rhetoric and the very real suffering of thousands made me aware for the first time of how ideology functions (though of course I didn’t know that at the time).

Sampie Terreblanche, writing about the secret economic policy meetings between the pre-transition ANC and the corporate sector, says that “[t]he main characteristic of every phase of the AAC [Anglo American Corporation]-led search for a new accumulation strategy was that the supreme goal of economic policy should be to attain a high economic growth rate, and that all other objectives should be subordinated to this. By convincing ANC leaders to accept the AAC’s approach, the corporate sector in effect persuaded – or forced – the ANC to move away from its traditional priority, namely to uplift the impoverished black majority socially

⁸⁷ See ‘Marines Fact File: Hummer vs. Humvee’, in *Marines*, July-December 2004, www.marines.mil.

⁸⁸ See *Affluenza*, pp. 26-27.

and economically.”⁸⁹ The South African liberation was seen by corporations not as a democratic revolution but as an opportunity to enforce free market policies on a fledgling country, directly contradicting the ANC’s own Freedom Charter which states that “the People shall share in the country’s wealth,” “the national wealth of our country, the heritage of all South Africans, shall be restored to the people,” “the mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks, and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole,” and that “all other industries and trade shall be controlled to assist the well-being of the people.”⁹⁰ A policy and a promise reaffirmed by Nelson Mandela in a note from his prison cell in 1990 which stated that “the change or modification of our views in this regard is inconceivable”.⁹¹ These promises, of course, never materialized for the majority of our country’s oppressed black citizens due to the restrictive ‘free market’ economic policies put in place by the ANC under the coercive influence of the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the World Bank, the corporate sector, and the fascist Apartheid government.⁹²

Now, many years later (with Diepsloot bigger than ever), the ANC have a new slogan: “We have a good story to tell”. This is perhaps the most honest thing a political party has ever said, but not in the way that they intended. The ANC *does* have a great struggle narrative, and by employing it so outright as Realpolitik they show us that it is indeed just that – a narrative. One that they can now exploit to further their own causes – that are as far removed as possible from their original struggle heroes’ causes. The leadership empowers only itself, the Communist Party through their close association with the ruling party supports free market capitalism even when they pay lip-service to socialist ideals⁹³, Mandela is dead, and all the while the ANC wants to tell stories.

The fact that we are forced to swallow this degree of quasi-ideological bullshit gives new meaning to the phrase ‘you are what you eat’.

⁸⁹ Terreblanche, Sampie. *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002*. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press: Scottsville. 2012. p. 96

⁹⁰ in *ibid.* p. 84.

⁹¹ In: Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine*. Penguin Books: London. 2008. p. 194-195.

⁹² *ibid.* pp. 194-217.

⁹³ For an interesting account of the politics of Diepsloot see Anton Harber’s fascinating *Diepsloot* (2011), in which it is made clear that the Communist Party, while trying to fight for socialist ideals, are consistently hamstrung by the ANC. Instead of breaking with the ruling party and trying to make a difference on their own they remain in the tripartite structure – leading to political infighting and making it impossible to achieve anything concrete.

Meaning in Meaninglessness –

*Welcome to Night Vale*⁹⁴ is an exceedingly popular podcast, the nightly community radio show of the fictional eponymous town, “a sleepy desert community where the sun is hot, the moon is beautiful, and mysterious lights pass overhead while we all pretend to sleep”. Though many have likened it to the work of H.P. Lovecraft, I believe it is closer to the work of Borges – despite the existence of five-headed dragons and unknowable creatures from the void. All these strange events are seen as completely normal by the community of Night Vale. When a mysterious glowing cloud, for instance, appears above the town and begins raining down the carcasses of small animals the host, Cecil, advises listeners to carry a sturdy umbrella with them on their daily tasks. Aside from the supernatural happenings, the safety of the town’s inhabitants is also threatened by a “vague yet menacing government agency”, and a surprisingly transparent authoritarian Town Council:

Let’s talk about safety when taking your children out to play in the Scrub Lands and the Sand Wastes. You need to give them plenty of water, make sure there’s a shade tree in the area, and keep an eye on the helicopter colours. Are the unmarked helicopters circling the area black? Probably World Government. Not a good area for play that day. Are they blue? That’s the Sherriff’s Secret Police. They’ll keep a good eye on your kids, and hardly ever take one. Are they painted with complex murals depicting birds of prey diving? No one knows what those helicopters are, or what they want. Do not play in the area. Return to your home, and lock the doors until a Sherriff’s Secret Policeman leaves a carnation on your porch to indicate that the danger has passed. Cover your ears to blot out the screams. Also, remember: Gatorade is basically soda, so give your kids plain old water, and maybe some orange slices when they play.

Sometimes the lines between the two become blurred, as when *The Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives In Your Home* (yes, that is the character’s name) runs for mayor, competing against the aforementioned five-headed dragon (Hiram McDaniels) for this position. The show runs the gamut between surreal humour, surreal horror, traffic reports, nihilistic proverbs (“What doesn’t kill you only makes life longer”), cosmic poetry,

⁹⁴ Please see: <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/mar/14/night-vale-podcast>; <http://the-artifice.com/welcome-to-night-vale/>; and for the show itself: <http://podbay.fm/show/536258179>.

unexplained deaths, town calendars (“Wednesday has been cancelled”), satires of corporate sponsors (The NRA reminds us: “Guns don’t kill people. We cannot be killed by guns. We are immune to bullets, *and it is a miracle*”), and announcements of PTA meetings.

WTVN’s crowning achievement, I believe, is that in all of this insanity, where people are constantly faced with cosmic horror and unexplained, seemingly meaningless events, the show manages to make meaning out of it. From this pit of despair comes strikingly beautiful moments like, “The desert seems vast, even endless, and yet scientists tell us that somewhere, even now, there is snow,” and, “Today you will meet a beautiful stranger. Actually, hundreds of beautiful strangers. Everyone is beautiful, and you know almost none of them,” and, “Whisper a dangerous secret to someone you care about. Now they have the power to destroy you. But they won’t. This is what love is”.

And in our own world, where the five-headed dragons, and the giant spider made out of thousands of smaller spiders, and the glow cloud are replaced with cancer, and random chance accidents, and our ridiculously soft and vulnerable organs, we can all take a page out of *WTVN*’s book and look for the beauty and meaning in the transient and miniscule nature of our lives – “The future is what you make of it. Just remember that your supplies are limited”.

***Cash 4 Gold* –**

In season 16, episode 2 of *South Park*, Stan receives a bolo tie from his grandfather, who bought it for \$6000 from a television marketplace designed specifically to take advantage of elderly people. He tries to sell the bolo tie and the ‘cash 4 gold’ places he goes to only offer him around \$10. Trying to figure out this discrepancy – and who to put the blame on – the kids decide to investigate. They confront everyone in the system – the TV salesman, the cash 4 gold places, the smelters, and eventually arrive at the Indian sweatshops where the jewellery is manufactured.

We then see the entire process: the sweatshop makes the jewellery, sells it to the studios, who sell it to the customers, who give it to their grandchildren, who sell it at the cash 4 gold places, who sell it to the smelters, who sell it to the Indian factories. The genius of *South*

Park's representation of this circuitous capitalist enterprise is in the background music⁹⁵: at first an acapella parody of elevator muzak. But it slowly devolves, at the end becoming dogs barking and atonal yells. This reveals to us that the capitalist loop can never be a closed circle of profit – there are always victims that the industry, charmingly, calls ‘externalities’. Though ‘externalities’ is usually the term used for pollution, deforestation, or other environmental or social impacts that the corporation does not take responsibility for, my aim here is to take the definition to its logical end: the labourers in these factories can be considered ‘externalities’ since they pay a cost that they did not *choose* to incur – they are essentially coerced or forced into these conditions. So, whether they are the third world minors working for slave wages or the elderly that are manipulated into spending their retirement funds or the entire earth itself, the circle of consumer goods ripple outward, and the ripples become tidal waves, devastating lives as far as they go, providing profit only for those inside the first circle – which is in reality the only space *outside* of it. Since they are the ones making the impact, it does not seem that they suffer its consequences.

At the end of the episode an old woman calls into ‘Dean’s Jewelry[sic] Bonanza’ and convinces the host to kill himself – an amazing act of revenge. We should all be convincing exploitative capitalists to kill themselves.

Sneaking In –

Much pop music today is all about excess. An easy example is ‘I Got a Hangover’ by Taio Cruz, featuring the rapper Flo Rida. The hook of the song is “I’ve got a hangover, whoa / I’ve been drinking too much, for sure / I got a hangover, whoa / I got an empty cup / So fill it up / So I can go until I blow up, eh / So I can drink until I throw up, eh / And I don’t ever want to grow up, eh / I wanna keep it going, keep keep, keep it going, going, going, going”. The message of irresponsibility and immaturity here is writ large – and is only enhanced by the music video in which Mr. Cruz, Mr. Rida and their various friends and employees party in a mansion, drinking vodka from baby bottles, and in a giant crib – so accurately describing this work’s regressive desire to return to the innocence and irresponsibility of early childhood that analysis is hardly necessary. At various points in the video they steal a car, a yacht, and apparently a private jet. It is clear that there is no designated driver involved. The song is

⁹⁵ Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6f6P5Ceuc4>; and for the creators’ (Matt Stone and Trey Parker) commentary on the processing of making the episode, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNEYisBo8Js>

insanely popular, its official video on YouTube having amassed over 88 million views in two years. Though of course I wouldn't think that people listen to this music for the lyrics, I assume it is so popular because people agree or identify with the song.

But perhaps there is a way to subvert this kind of pop music, not by attacking it directly, but by infiltrating its realm. 'Paper Planes' by M.I.A. (born Mathangi Arulpragasam) sounds at first listen like any other pop/dance song. It uses all the idiomatic expressions of the genre – electronic beats, sampling and remixing, a catchy hook, etc. It even seems to also promote immorality and irresponsibility: “All I wanna do is [gunshot gunshot gunshot]⁹⁶ / and [cash register opening] take your money”. But in conjunction with the video, it becomes clear that the song is in fact satirising British and American conservative views of immigrants from the third world. In the video M.I.A. (herself a Sri-Lankan immigrant) is shown working the menial jobs typically reserved for immigrants – sandwich maker in a food truck, sales girl in a market stall, cashier in a DVD shop – creating a clear contrast between the alarmist stereotype and the banal reality of an immigrant working for poverty-level wages. If one still ties the verse to violence, at least now we know why people turn to crime. The title of the song is itself a reference to entry visas, and how difficult it is for people from certain parts of the world to acquire these and the resulting use of falsified papers: “If you catch me at the border, I've got visas in my name / if you come around here we make them all day”.

That this song is so incredibly popular (over 60 million views on YouTube, nominated for a Grammy, and I distinctly remember it being on every club and radio station's playlist for months) shows that there is space in the homogenous, bland world of pop for songs that are socio-politically active and critical. We need more of this.⁹⁷

E-Waste –

The first world tends to ignore where their *things* come from, ever since the hard labour and more obviously pollutant industries were moved out of their countries to the places that could hardly protect themselves from this type of imperialism. The best example might be the

⁹⁶ In square brackets are sampled sound effects.

⁹⁷ Another example of M.I.A.'s brilliant subversion of pop stereotypes is 'Bad Girls'. The chorus – “Live fast, die young / Bad girls do it well” – seems like more pop rubbish, but it again emerges as a commentary – in this case, on the practice of stoning women for 'immoral' behaviour. Her female backup dancers in the video are in hijabs, but (adding another layer of possible meaning) the hijabs are made from military fatigues, creating a sense of a call to arms for radical feminists.

burgeoning tech industry. Many hail recent developments in technology to be the forerunner to a paperless future. These gadgets seem flashier, faster, and greener than ever before. But what is being ignored is how these things are being made, and where they go after use.

According to the BBC, cell phones are set to outnumber people this year.⁹⁸ Brahim Sanou, director of the ITU Telecommunication Development Bureau, says that "the mobile revolution is 'm-powering' people in developing countries by delivering ICT applications in education, health, government, banking, environment and business."⁹⁹ It's just too bad that there are no ICT applications to get rid of the millions of tonnes of e-waste generated by the West, or to mine the coltan the industry needs to thrive as it does.

Coltan is a mineral used in nearly every digital device – cell phones, tablets, laptops and PC's. 80% of the world's coltan can be found in the Kivu provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Since a rise in demand for this digital mineral in 2000, "The momentary price hike greatly intensified the violence in the Eastern Congo and encouraged multiple groups and nation-states to implicate themselves in the conflict in the hope of making a killing [...] Invading militias, like the RCD, the Ugandan-backed MLC, and the indigenous Mai Mai militias, used civilian forced labor to acquire as much coltan as they possibly could, expending the money from its sale to finance the military operations that have exacted spectacular violence on Congolese civilians."¹⁰⁰

Last year Virgin Mobile released an advertisement for their new deal: an iPhone 5 with unlimited minutes and data for \$30/month.¹⁰¹ The commercial consists of people finding out about this great special offer, and destroying their not-brand-new-anymore phones in a variety of creative 'accidental' ways in order to justify their purchase of the deal. They do it quickly, with very little fuss, and only pretending to be upset. This is the blasé attitude that comes from not knowing where one's garbage goes.

Let us imagine, for the sake of argument, that those recently-purchased-recently-destroyed devices find their way, through the e-recycling process, to Agbogbloshie – the largest e-scrap

⁹⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-22464368>

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Smith, James H. "Tantalus in the Digital Age: Coltan Ore, Temporal Dispossession, and 'Movement' in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo." *American Ethnologist* 38.1 (2011): 17–35.

¹⁰¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mf4qVdO06vE&noredirect=1>

yard in Ghana (though they may also end up in any of the hundreds of similar places in Latin America, Africa or Asia). Where, “for economic reasons, some have to choose between working in poisonous conditions or remain perpetually consigned to poverty.”¹⁰² Here they will be disassembled by hand, often by children younger than 15, to find the few precious pieces of copper, iron, and aluminium. After this process (which exposes not only the workers, but everyone in their community, to poisonous substances), the plastic casings, lead filaments, and other worthless materials are burnt, or dumped in open dumps or bodies of water, further destroying the environment.¹⁰³ “The situation is exacerbated by the shortening innovation cycles of hardware, and the dialectic dark side of this ‘innovation’: the planned obsolescence that ensures the industry’s growth, which is most dramatic in the case of mobile phones. It is leading to an ever higher turnover of devices. The lifespan of central processing units in computers has dropped from 4–6 years in 1997 to 2 years in 2005.”¹⁰⁴

We should all be forced to live in our *own* garbage. Perhaps then we will take greater care of where, when and how we throw our consumed consumer products away.

Prophecies –

Sidney Lumet’s *Network* (1976) is most widely remembered for the protagonist newscaster Howard Beale’s radical humanist outburst on live TV, saying:

I don't have to tell you things are bad. Everybody knows things are bad. It's a depression. Everybody's out of work or scared of losing their job. The dollar buys a nickel's worth. Banks are going bust. Shopkeepers keep a gun under the counter. Punks are running wild in the street and there's nobody anywhere who seems to know what to do, and there's no end to it. We know the air is unfit to breathe and our food is unfit to eat, and we sit watching our TVs while some local newscaster tells us that today we had fifteen homicides and sixty-three violent crimes, as if that's the way it's supposed to be. We know things are bad — worse than bad. They're crazy. It's like everything everywhere is going crazy, so we don't go out anymore. We sit in the house, and slowly the world we are living in is getting smaller, and all we say is:

¹⁰² Agyei-Mensah, Samuel, and Martin Oteng-Ababio. "Perceptions of health and environmental impacts of e-waste management in Ghana." *International journal of environmental health research* 22.6 (2012): 500-517.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Premalatha, M., et al. "The Generation, Impact, and Management of E-Waste: State of the Art." *Critical Reviews in Environmental Science and Technology* 44.14 (2014): 1577-1678.

'Please, at least leave us alone in our living rooms. Let me have my toaster and my TV and my steel-belted radials and I won't say anything. Just leave us alone.' Well, I'm not gonna leave you alone. I want you to get MAD! I don't want you to protest. I don't want you to riot — I don't want you to write to your congressman, because I wouldn't know what to tell you to write. I don't know what to do about the depression and the inflation and the Russians and the crime in the street. All I know is that first you've got to get mad. You've got to say: 'I'm a human being, god-dammit! My life has value!'

This speech inspires the masses of television viewers to shout with him: "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!"

This is an inspiring scene, and we swell with righteous indignation just like the thousands of viewers. It was even used in the pseudo-intellectual 'documentary' *Zeitgeist*. But in context we know that it is all set up. The network executives allow his rants because they are great for ratings. We never see the masses enact the revolution, and we must assume that they are too busy watching the "mad prophet of the airwaves" exhorting them to rise up to actually rise up.

We see here a system that, instead of destroying its enemy (or allowing its enemy to destroy himself, since Beale originally wanted to commit suicide on-air), embraces him, and in doing so castrates his radical ideology. He is essentially censored by non-censorship. Adorno tells us that workers in the culture industry either "contribute directly to the perpetuation of the system as entertainment or edification" or, "by being different, they become rarities and once again marketable."¹⁰⁵ It is a great testament to the efficiency of this systemic technique that we forget about its manipulation, even when watching a film that exposes it, and we – like the fictional TV viewers – remain comfortable in our homes, watching.

***Bloed en Yster / Bloed en Grond*¹⁰⁶ –**

Among the foundational myths of the Afrikaner *volk*, and thus Afrikaner nationalism, the most central is undoubtedly Blood River. The frontier battle between the Trekkers, led by Afrikaner heroes Sarel Cilliers and Andries Pretorius, and the Zulus, led by King Dingane,

¹⁰⁵ 'Cultural Criticism and Society'. *Prisms*. p. 25.

¹⁰⁶ Blood and Iron / Blood and Earth

saw the death of 3000 Zulus. According to Hermann Gilliomee, “Afrikaner nationalists of the *next century* considered Blood River the battle that ‘saved’ the trek and secured the victory of Christianity and ‘civilization.’ But the victory itself secured only a temporary beachhead.”¹⁰⁷

Why then, did this relatively unimportant battle assume the massive symbolic importance attributed to it by later nationalists? There are a few important tropes that can be teased out from the story (as told by Afrikaners). Firstly, the prelude to the battle (the murder of Piet Retief and his men) establishes the Afrikaner as a persecuted minority, tricked and short changed at every opportunity, the innocent victims of Black duplicity and conspiracy. Thus the Afrikaner must fight tooth and nail for what is ‘his’, never trusting any other culture or nation to be fair. Secondly, the military strategy employed by Pretorius, the *laager* of ox-wagons, has become symbolic of the Afrikaner’s self-perceived solidarity and leads directly to the Nationalist slogan “eendrag maak mag”: uniformity is power. In another light, of course, the *laager* becomes the most fitting symbol for the *volk*’s resistance to integration and their hysterically protectionist and defensive reaction to anyone challenging their dominance in any sphere. Thirdly, the pact made between Cilliers and the Christian God that “if God granted the men victory, they and their descendants would commemorate the day of the battle and would build a church”¹⁰⁸ is perhaps the most important symbolic leftover from this historically minor incident. Paul Kruger, in his deliberate nation-building project, “turned the movement of the frontier farmers into the deeper interior, now called the Great Trek, into a *heroic myth* emphasizing the trekkers’ ‘secret passion for freedom.’ The Battle of Blood River of 1838 and the vow made before the battle was to him the symbol of the will of the Transvaal burghers to survive as an independent people against overwhelming odds. The commemoration of these events became a grand *political* and *religious* occasion.”¹⁰⁹

With this mythification of the battle, the Afrikaners’ political ideals become enmeshed with a religious ideal of being a ‘Chosen People’. All the evils enacted and engendered by Afrikaner nationalism thus become justified by God Himself and appear to be a teleological necessity for the Afrikaner to reach the Promised Land. In the Afrikaner psyche the Promised Land is not somewhere to be travelled to, but a place to be created – a South Africa wiped clean of any cultural difference. The vow also placed the Church (specifically the Dutch Reformed, or

¹⁰⁷ Gilliomee, Hermann. *The Afrikaners*. Tafelberg: Cape Town. 2003. p. 165. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.* p. 234. Emphasis mine.

N.G., Church) squarely in the realm of political power. In this way the two (Church and State) seem to have rubbed off on each other and exchanged meanings almost freely – the State becomes a Godly enterprise, and the Church becomes a vessel for political training and reinforcement.

Whenever an Afrikaner speaks ‘as an Afrikaner’, he is talking about, and reacting to, Blood River.

The Missionary Position –

Maxwell Mukova and Fainos Mangena, speaking of the complicity of the missionary project in the colonization of Africa, write that “[i]t is during the Enlightenment period that critical self-awareness in Western Europe emerged. The racial, cultural and religious sense of superiority over non-western societies also got amplified during this period. Western Europe regarded itself as culturally advanced and superior when compared to Africa such that it considered itself duty-bound to culturally uplift the Africans. For the Europeans it appeared logical to “de-Africanize” and in a sense “Europeanize” Africans as they envisaged a universal victory for the Western European culture”¹¹⁰

It is clear that this sense of cultural and especially religious superiority did not die with colonialism: every year thousands of young, white, upper-middle class students make their pilgrimage into ‘darkest’ Africa to bring the word of Christ to the uneducated heathens¹¹¹. Armed with their all-encompassing love for their fellow man, they build schools, pray, bond, have a few laughs, convince the impoverished natives that they will go to hell if they don’t support the church both spiritually and financially, and leave with a fulfilling sense of their achievement and photos of themselves with black toddlers to post on Facebook. The locals are left with a poorly-built school and an ideology that undoes decades of decolonization; redeemed in the eyes of God.

¹¹⁰ Mukova, Maxwell, and Fainos Mangena. "Ethical Implications of Missionary Christianity and the Emergence of Chibarirwe African Initiated Church in Colonial Zimbabwe: A Cultural Rights Discourse." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 36.2 (2012): 169. p. 170.

¹¹¹ You can sign up for the mission with the International House of Prayer at any one of their 540 convenient locations (<http://www.ihopnetwork.com/index.php/home/hop-list/>), or if you prefer to keep it local, join in with the Shofar church in Stellenbosch (<http://www.shofaronline.org/reach-out/>).

The 2013 documentary *God Loves Uganda* by Roger Ross Williams shows the most striking portrait of this “ideological imperialism”¹¹² – convinced by the Western evangelical extremism, Uganda has enacted anti-homosexuality laws that promise imprisonment for homosexuals or, more insidiously, the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality¹¹³. But even more far-reaching than legislation is the cultural damage that this neo-colonial project is wreaking – as *God Loves Uganda* shows, there are vengeful, ‘righteous’ lynch-mobs springing up around the country ready to ‘defend’ their newly acquired evangelical beliefs by killing homosexuals and dissidents. This, along with the fervent nationalism, the giant rallies, the fear of outsiders and the regressive obsession with keeping the country ‘pure’, makes it quite clear that the evangelical God is a fascist.

The Parable of the Madman (Redux) –

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market-place, and cried incessantly: "I am looking for the Übermensch! I am looking for the Übermensch!"

As many of those who did not believe in the Übermensch were standing together there, he excited considerable laughter. Have you lost him, then? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? Thus they shouted and laughed. The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances.

"Where has the Übermensch gone?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. We are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not perpetually falling? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is it not more and more night coming on all the time? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying the Übermensch? Do we not

¹¹² As one reviewer absolutely accurately calls it. ("God Loves Uganda' sheds light on Western evangelical extremism in Africa." *UWIRE Text* 27 Oct. 2013: 1.)

¹¹³ Please see: <http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/Uganda-draws-up-new-anti-gay-law-activists-20141108>

smell anything yet of the Übermensch 's decomposition? The Übermensch too decomposes. The Übermensch is dead. The Übermensch remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become übermenschen simply to be worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whosoever shall be born after us - for the sake of this deed he shall be part of a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and again regarded his listeners; and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern to the ground, and it broke and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time has not come yet. The tremendous event is still on its way, still travelling - it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the distant stars - and yet they have done it themselves."

Thus spake Nietzsche.

Monumental –

It is strange, unsettling, and at the same time not at all surprising that the Vrouemonument (Women's Monument), a monument outside of Bloemfontein dedicated to the brave 'volksmoeders' (mothers of the nation) of the Boer War, consists of a Boer mother and her children, sitting in the shade of a 37 meter tall phallus (obelisk)¹¹⁴. Though the monument supposedly commemorates and honours women it is obvious that, as Sabine Marschall says, "the rhetoric used was designed to confine the Afrikaner women ever more tightly into the mythology of Afrikanerdom as submissive, docile emissaries of the *volks*-ideal."¹¹⁵ The women become the ideological tools of the nationalist, patriarchal Afrikaner Father with his compensatory obelisk.

¹¹⁴ Explore the monument here: <http://vrouemonument.co.za/>

¹¹⁵ Marschall, Sabine. "Serving male agendas: two national women's monuments in South Africa." *Women's Studies* 33.8 (2004): 1009-1033. p. 1012.

Mammoth (Redux) –

Some days ago a British newspaper announced the sequencing of the genome of the woolly mammoth¹¹⁶. The Long Now Foundation has already announced that it will start trying to make mammoths as soon as possible. The idea of a perfectly frozen, preserved mammoth to be resurrected now seems like a sci-fi/fantasy cliché, like the latest instalment in the Jurassic Park franchise, or an overblown Discovery Channel what-if CGI ‘documentary’. Thus it is a mystery that this finding was not more widely publicised.

We no longer control nature only in the most basic sense, with zoos and enclosures and deforestation and destruction, we now control the very data that life and ‘nature’ are made up of. We have to ask why TLNF is trying to drive the mammoth to de-extinction. According to them they want to “produce new mammoths that are capable of repopulating the vast tracts of tundra and boreal forest in Eurasia and North America”¹¹⁷. They not only want to ‘save’ nature, but to reclaim it.

TLNF is a strange phenomenon, founded by musician Brian Eno, they say it “hopes to provide a counterpoint to today's accelerating culture and help make long-term thinking more common. [They] hope to creatively foster responsibility in the framework of the next 10,000 years”¹¹⁸. Perhaps Adorno was right when he said that “[t]he desire for the presence of the most ancient is a hope that animal creation might survive the wrong that man has done it, if not man himself, and give rise to a better species, one that finally makes a success of life.”¹¹⁹

But there might be something else going on here – a specific archival impulse, the drive to save things not for their importance, but in the bureaucratic manner of filing cabinets and hard drives. ‘Nature’ becomes here not that which is outside of civilization, nor totally in it. It is no longer ‘for us’ – we have lost that right, forfeited it by our own stupid actions. ‘Nature’ becomes what we preserve in a time capsule for some future civilization to find and enjoy.

¹¹⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-32432693>

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ <http://longnow.org/about/>

¹¹⁹ *MM*, p. 115.

We live in Pretville –

The Afrikaans musical *Pretville* (2012)¹²⁰ – garish, pastel, saccharine, set in an alternate version of the 1950s where Apartheid doesn't exist – is the ultimate Afrikaner fantasy: typical Afrikaner revisionism and denial that pretends that Apartheid never happened while at the same time holding on to the privileges whites gained through their systemic abuses.

In Pretville (Funville) blacks and coloureds are happy to be manual labourers, best friends, back-up singers and other incidental characters, homosexuals, or rather, the one solitary person with a queer sexuality is happy to be a flaming, yet unthreatening queen, and of course a hairdresser. He is also the mayor of the town, but this gesture is obviously meant to be a comical one: “Imagine, a gay coloured mayor!” The story seems completely unaware that he would in reality have been personally and systematically abused and dispossessed in any version of the 1950s outside of this ludicrous pastel dream world. The Afrikaners are, of course, more than happy to be the rich protagonists, and the only characters with slightly more than one dimension (though none of the characters show any sense of growth, which is an apt metaphor for the stunted development of the Afrikaner mind-set that squeezed this film out and drove it to financial success). Even *Hairspray* had the decency to address racial tensions in America in the 60s. Of course the film is meant to be pure escapist fun, but I don't think that is any excuse for the glaring ethical problems with this very specific, very exclusionary representation of a tragic part of South African history – imagine a musical set in World War II Germany where Auschwitz is represented as a summer camp, and the pure insensitivity of a project like *Pretville* comes into sharp relief.

The town – and it is literally a town, the set left in place to act as an Afrikaner tourist trap for those who long to physically live the nostalgic screen fantasy (and in a very Lynchian twist you can watch the film *Pretville* in the Pretville cinema in case you wanted to double down on ignorance)¹²¹ – is the supreme example of political denialism, ignoring any and all political, racial, cultural, institutional, or class antagonisms. What we are fed instead is a love story, a happy ending and musical numbers with terrible choreography.

¹²⁰ Official trailer here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B00xryz9p4k>

¹²¹ Plan your trip here: <http://www.pretville.co.za/> (click ‘besoek Pretville’), or take the video tour here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPCO4QpxVYg>

Ideology –

We must all commit suicide, be flung into darkness and uncertainty, let go of all we thought we knew. If we are to have any hope of surviving, we will have to kill ourselves.

Who We Talk About When We Talk About ‘We’ –

Imagine a circle. First, draw it around yourself. This is the royal authorial ‘we’. Then, your family and friends. Your colleagues. Acquaintances. Expand the circle until it includes members of your community/communities – your subculture, your suburb, your city, your political party, your class, race, sexuality, and gender, your country, your continent. Draw the circle around every human on earth. Watch as the circle expands through time, reaching into the past and stretching toward the future. Wider still, around every animal, then every living thing, then all things organic and inorganic. Every thing in the entire universe can become part of the ‘we’.

Which is not to say that all becomes homogenized under this gaze – the circles exist concentrically within the largest one, sometimes expanding or contracting, sometimes overlapping and contradicting. It is a diagrammatic way of thinking the common ground that exists between us all despite our differences and complexities. Sometimes my ‘we’ means ‘academics’, sometimes ‘Afrikaners’, sometimes ‘artists’, sometimes ‘South Africans’, sometimes ‘middle classes’, and most of the time ‘humans’.

When I use ‘we’ in this project I am speaking of myself (obviously) and you, the reader. The ‘we’ here is an invitation, an outstretched hand. I use ‘we’ so that you may come into my text, that you may converse with it. It is perhaps idealistic, or even rhetorical trickery, but I like to think that you and I are in this thing together.

To study everyday life would be a completely absurd undertaking, unable to grasp anything of its object, if this study was not expressly for the purpose of transforming everyday life.

The practice of writing (the exposition of certain intellectual considerations to a reader or readers), being an extremely commonplace form of human relations in a rather large sector of society, is itself part of the everyday life that must be criticized.

Habit in all its forms – beginning with the habit of handling a few *professional* concepts (concepts produced by the division of labour) – masks reality behind privileged conventions.

‘It is thus desirable to demonstrate, by a slight alteration of the usual procedures, that everyday life is right here. These words are being communicated by way of an appropriation in order to take the simplest opportunity to break with the appearance of distinctly individual authorship. There are two conversations here: between you and me and between the authors I draw on. A slight discomfiting break with accustomed routine may serve to bring directly into the field of questioning of everyday life (a questioning otherwise completely abstract) the very practice of academic writing, as well as any number of other forms of using time or objects, forms that are considered “normal” and not even noticed, and which ultimately, condition us. With such a detail, as with everyday life as a whole, alteration is always the necessary and sufficient condition for experimentally bringing into clear view the object of our study, which would otherwise remain uncertain – an object which is itself less to be studied than to be changed.’¹²²

Possessed –

After one of the many car accidents in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Week End* (1967) we hear a woman wailing in despair. The camera slowly pans over the wreck, and we see her husband – bloodied, immobile. The pan continues and it is revealed that the woman is in fact mourning the loss of her Louis Vuitton handbag. A ridiculous moment, but one that speaks true: the ultimate tragedy for the bourgeois is to lose our possessions. To lose our things, markers of our identities, is to be shorn of a limb, to have a loved one taken away. One might wonder – who is the possessor? Who the possessed?

Nihilo –

How ridiculous, this constant search for meaning, this obsessive interpretation of ink on paper, paint on canvas, data on screen, the random mess of human history, this atrocity exhibition. What drives us to this futile undertaking?

¹²² Appropriated and altered., under a Creative Commons licence, from: Debord, Guy. ‘Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life’, in: Knabb, Ken, ed. *Situationist international anthology*. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006. pp. 113-114.

Heiner Müller's Hamlet (from his postmodern adaptation *Hamletmachine*) said that we are all rotting in step with the earth's endless rotation.¹²³ Perhaps we seek meaning so that we do not have to realize this. Or perhaps so that we *can* realize it, and allow the abyss to gaze into us, hopefully without shattering like unlucky mirrors.

Cash 4 Gold II –

'Prepping' is the time-honoured practice of survivalists making ready for the impending and inevitable Soviet Nuclear Armageddon/Y2K/the 2012 Mayan Apocalypse/World War III, and the less clearly defined TEOTWAWKI (The End of the World as We Know It) and SHTF (Shit Hits The Fan). These people, usually suburban, middle-class citizens, prepare bunkers, stockpile non-perishable foods, petrol, medicines, weapons and other necessities they feel they will need when the SHTF.

Some survivalists spend quite a lot of their income on precious metals, mostly gold and silver. They argue that, even though the value of these metals will decrease in case of TEOTWAWKI, they will still be able to use it to barter for goods and services. This charming gentleman, Richard Morgan, writing as The Great Northern Prepper,¹²⁴ advises sagely: **"ALSO PLEASE STICK TO PHYSICAL METALS! BY THIS I MEAN DONT BUY ETF'S OR OTHER "BUYS" THAT ARE FALSE PAPER ASSETS, THOSE ARE JUST NUMBERS ON A SPREADSHEET! ONLY BUY WHAT YOU CAN HOLD IN YOUR HAND, STORE IN YOUR HOME AND HAND OVER YOURSELF!"** One can understand the charm that the physical metals must have – they are real, they have weight, they shimmer, unlike numbers on a computer screen that only represent real value. For these preppers the money is the signifier to the gold and silver's signified, not realizing that gold itself is also just another signifier, worth no more than 'just numbers on a spreadsheet.' Meanwhile, companies that sell gold¹²⁵ are making a killing off of these paranoid souls.

Adorno said that "[the capitalist] would rather that everything end than for mankind to put an end to reification,"¹²⁶ and all of this, this community, their subterranean economy, their 'investment advice', goes to show that while we can quite readily and gleefully imagine the

¹²³ Müller, Heiner. 'Hamletmachine' in: *Wadsworth Anthology of Drama*. ed. Worthen, W.B. CENGAGE, 2004.

¹²⁴ <http://www.greatnorthernprepper.com/barter-metals/precious-metals-investing/>

¹²⁵ Like goldline.com, or cmi-gold-silver.com, that have specially marketed 'Survival Coins' (one wonders what makes them different from other coins).

¹²⁶ 'Cultural Criticism and Society'. *Prisms*. p. 24.

End of The World (as We Know It), we have a very hard time imagining the End of Capitalism.

A Modest Proposal –

All members of parliament should be paid no more than minimum wage.

The Greatest Love of All (I Believe the Children are Our Future) –

While substitute teaching at an upper-middle class school in Johannesburg, a grade 8 boy comes up to me. I'm wearing an old Soviet pin I found in a disused costume store when I myself was still a teenager. It features Lenin's profile on a red flag.

"Who's on your pin?" he asks.

"Oh, that's Vladimir Lenin."

"So are you a Communist?"

"Yes. Well, sort of. Yes. But also no," I say, not sure where to begin explaining Neo-Marxism, or the semi-ironic view I take to the pin.

"Oh. Well, I'm a Nazi," he says and puts his hands in his pockets. I do not know what to say. I do not know how this child, born in the year 2001, sees any charm in Nazism. "Yeah, I follow Hitler," he adds.

"So you're a racist?"

"Yeah."

I pause. I ask the only question that unceasingly pounds through my mind: "Why?"

"I just think the world would be better if we just killed all of the others," he says.

"Well, that's patently untrue."

"That's just my opinion," he uses the defensive catchphrase of a tolerant society he must hate. "And there are other people like me. I'm going to go to America and join the neo-Nazi underground."

"I think... I think you might need to very seriously reconsider your stance on this matter," I say, mostly because I can't think of anything else to say.

He says "Yeah, sure," and shuffles away with that special teenage shuffle. I wish I had said more, said something to convince him otherwise. I wish I had played out my own version of *American History X*. But I am not in a movie, and I am little more than a child myself, and I genuinely have no idea how to tell a thirteen year old that being a Nazi is a terrible idea.

We on the left can no longer comfort ourselves, or excuse our non-activity, with the old teleological story of inevitable progress towards liberation (or at least liberalization) – ‘once all the old conservatives die off we’ll have a better, more open-minded world.’ That child proves that ideologies thought to be extinct, or soon-to-be extinct, are remarkably adept at reproducing themselves, and might never go away completely. ‘The sins of the father’ is far more than a theological conceit.

Later that week, while invigilating exams, I see a black grade 8 boy carving a swastika into the desk.

MRA –

Men’s Rights Activism is a ‘new’ ‘political’ ‘movement’ (all those irony-quotes are absolutely necessary) that begins from the assumption that men in contemporary society are being oppressed by women, who use their gender and sexuality to manipulate, and that society unfairly privileges women. Their complaints range from ‘divorce laws are tougher on men,’ to ‘girls don’t like me and that makes me sad,’ ‘girls don’t like me they only like attractive guys and that makes me angry,’ to the far more disturbing ‘a girl didn’t want to have sex with me even though I bought her a drink,’ and ‘I got a girl I don’t even like pregnant and now she doesn’t want to get an abortion.’¹²⁷

On May 23 2014, a member of this community gunned down 18 people, killing six¹²⁸. Elliot Rodger, in his incredibly disturbing manifesto, says that he did this because even though he was wealthy and moderately good-looking girls did not want to have sex with him. They used their vaginas, according to him, to drain him of cash and then not give him what was ‘rightfully’ his, consistently ‘denying’ him by having sex with other men that he feels are not ‘worthy’, making him an ‘incel’ [the MRA community’s term for ‘involuntary celibate’, a virgin]. He comes to the conclusion that all women are inherently evil (not using the term as hyperbole, but actually comparing women to Hitler and the devil), and should not be allowed to choose their own reproductive partners, or make any other choices, for that matter. He decides to stage a Day of Retribution, the aforementioned mass shooting, stating that:

¹²⁷ You can read their subreddit here: <http://www.reddit.com/r/MensRights/>

¹²⁸ From ABC News: <http://abcnews.go.com/US/santa-barbara-killer-elliott-rodger-smiled-shooting-survivor/story?id=23923970>

Women's rejection of me is a declaration of war, and if it's war they want, then war they shall have. It will be a war that will result in their complete and utter annihilation. I will deliver a blow to my enemies that will be so catastrophic it will redefine the very essence of human nature. It was time to plot exactly what I will do on the Day of Retribution. I will be a god, punishing women and all of humanity for their depravity. I will finely deliver to them all of the pain and suffering they've dealt to me for so long. [...]The Second Phase will take place on the Day of Retribution itself, just before the climactic massacre. The Second Phase will represent my War on Women. I will punish all females for the crime of depriving me of sex. They have starved me of sex for my entire youth, and gave that pleasure to other men. In doing so, they took many years of my life away. I cannot kill every single female on earth, but I can deliver a devastating blow that will shake all of them to the core of their wicked hearts. I will attack the very girls who represent everything I hate in the female gender: The hottest sorority of UCSB.¹²⁹

Adorno said that “[b]eneath the lying ideology which sets the man up as superior, there is a secret one, no less untrue that sees him as inferior, the victim of manipulation, manoeuvring, fraud.”¹³⁰ In Rodger and his compatriots these two ideologies (though they are truly sides of one terrible coin) become fully integrated into each other. One of the leading lights of the movement, Stefan Molyneux (smelling suspiciously of sour grapes), asserts that “‘Women who choose a–holes guarantee child abuse. All the cold-hearted jerks who run the world came out of the vaginas of women who married a–holes. I don’t know how to make the world a better place without holding women accountable for choosing a–holes. Women worship at the feet of the devil and wonder why the world is evil. And then know what they say? ‘We’re victims!’”¹³¹ His comments reveal the astounding fear and insecurity of those in positions of privilege, but see themselves as oppressed – again, women are seen as capital-E Evil, their vaginas merely portals for ‘jerks’ that get power, money and women. These men have successfully deluded themselves into believing that they are victims, while at the same time deriding the ‘victim-mentality’ they see in women, and once again *actually* making women

¹²⁹ You can read the full 140 page autobiography-cum-manifesto here:
<http://abclocal.go.com/three/kabc/kabc/My-Twisted-World.pdf>

¹³⁰ *MM*, p. 177.

¹³¹ From *Time*: <http://time.com/2949435/what-i-learned-as-a-woman-at-a-mens-rights-conference/>

victims of their misplaced self-loathing: the most hateful form of resentment. Many members of the community were quick to distance themselves from Rodger, saying that he was a lone gunman, a sufferer of autism, completely insane. But a quick visit to their chat groups reveals a different story: there are those that worship him, that wish to emulate him, who think he has done the world a great service.¹³²

I do not wish to make this community seem bigger or more influential than they are in reality. They are, for the most part, a small subset of internet dwellers and are almost universally hated and ridiculed. But they are growing, and they are getting attention. The world cannot afford to write them off as caricatures (though they most certainly are) – the ignorant and the hateful have always been the most dangerous.

A Modest Proposal II –

Cosmetics should be tested on the models that market them.

Maboneng –

Part of the urban revival of Johannesburg, Joburg, Jozi, Maboneng precinct is bustling with artists, hipsters and tourists looking for an edgy-yet-trendy taste of Egoli. Take in an art exhibition, explore craft markets, have some cruelty-free steak or vegan falafel, or walk two blocks and see the crushing poverty and decay that surrounds the area – nothing says more about a neighbourhood than having to buy groceries through burglar bars. Possibilities abound.

(I must not judge too hastily. I know that the Maboneng project is one of gentrification-with-a-human-face, and we cannot rush progress).

The End –

Perhaps our cultural obsession with the apocalypse, the aesthetic of the apocalypse, is due to our knowledge (unconscious as it may be) that there are millions of people for whom the world *has* ended, who are already living our post-apocalyptic fantasies. Scenes from the

¹³² This journalist spent a day on their forums: <http://jezebel.com/lessons-from-a-day-spent-with-the-ucs-shooters-awful-f-1582884301>. A quick note: the term ‘an hero’, as one poster uses it, is not a grammatical mistake, but internet slang for ‘suicidal moron’.

Nigerian oil conflict,¹³³ the e-waste sites in India and China,¹³⁴ the obliterated Gaza strip:¹³⁵ these are images to rival any *Mad Max* or *The Book of Eli* or *Doomsday*. These films are truly (sym)pathetic.

We are shown, on a daily basis (if we can gather the courage to look at the news), that the world has ended, that it will end, that it is ending right now.

Heart of Darkness (Redux) –

“I hate y-“ I put the phone down. Too late. I heard his last few words. I grind my teeth. I see my friends through the window. They’re all laughing. I feel cut off from them. From the street with its construction workers and bergies and students. From the oaks around me. From the entire creation. I’m cut off from everything. I start crying. Tonight I’m getting drunk as fuck.

And now I’m standing with my phone in my hand again, shocked. I don’t know what to do with myself. It’s like this for the rest of the week, everything is vague and far away. It stays like this until I arrive in Johannesburg with its dirty winter air. Tomorrow Fritz is coming, an expatriate German and my father’s only friend. He’s going to take me to the hospital where my father is recovering from another suicide attempt. A psychiatric ward in the heart of Hillbrow.

When I get into the car Fritz tries to have a friendly conversation, but my responses are short, cut off. I can’t think about anything but what I’m about to see. I can’t think anything, except, My father can’t even succeed at suicide. How hard could it be?

From the air-conditioned inside of the car, windows closed, doors locked, the streets of Hillbrow look foreign. The faces of the poor follow the Audi wherever it goes. Everything is broken, busy falling apart. People shrink, trying to hide. People try to look bigger, to look intimidating. Heaps of trash stand on every street corner. Women wash their clothes on the sidewalk. Children squat behind weeds to defecate.

¹³³ Dorward, David. ‘Death, oil and religion: the origins of conflict in Nigeria run deep’. *The Conversation*. 2012. <http://theconversation.com/death-oil-and-religion-the-origins-of-conflict-in-nigeria-run-deep-5067>

¹³⁴ Brigden, K. et al. ‘Recycling of Electronic Wastes in China and India’. *Greenpeace*. 2005. <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/publications/reports/recycling-of-electronic-waste/>

¹³⁵ Kramer, Tania. ‘Operation Protective Edge: Escalation in Gaza’. *Deutsches Welle*. 2014. <http://www.dw.de/operation-protective-edge-escalation-in-gaza/a-17767324>

Shit, I think, the irony is too much for me – in a German’s vessel, on our way through a dangerous and strange place to go see if there’s anything to save in the one who’s looked too deep into the abyss.

I think, I’m in *Heart of Darkness* in an Audi.

The hospital is a space that doesn’t exist, where time has died. Everything is surreal. Half of the fluorescent lights flicker sporadically like broken neurons and synapses. It’s darker than a hospital should be. All the white is grey. It doesn’t smell like disinfectant, it smells like nothing – literally nothing. Nothingness.

The nurse is obviously bored because seconds after she finishes an English conversation on the phone she turns to us and pretends not to understand English. Fritz has been here before and knows how to handle it. While he gives her a fifty Rand note I stare down the hall. The end is dark and I can’t see past ten meters. From the darkness comes a voice, deep and gruff. It’s a language I don’t understand – probably Zulu or Xhosa. A man appears. He’s busy toyi-toying and singing a protest song. He’s in a hospital gown with nothing under it. When he gets closer he starts the song again, in English this time.

“Free Mandela! Free Mandela!”

Fritz looks at me and sees how confused I am.

“He was a member of MK, the ANC’s militant wing. He has post-traumatic stress disorder. He was tortured by the IFP in the 80s. He still thinks it’s 1988.”

“That’s awful.”

“He’s happy enough. He has something to fight for.”

Finally we go to my father’s room. His bed is empty and my first thought is that that’s all that’s left of him – a depression in a bed and the scent of medication. Then he comes out of the bathroom, wheeling a drip. He lies down and looks at me. He looks healthy, a little thin.

“Hi Son! I’m glad you came! Hello, Fritz.”

“Hello, Riaan. How are you feeling?” Fritz asks.

“Oh, you know,” he says and looks back to me. “How are you?”

“Okay, thanks.”

“And the swottings?”

“A little rough, but good.”

“That’s good. And have you made a lot of new friends in Stellenbosch?”

“Yes.” It’s as if the conversation from two weeks ago had never happened.

“That’s good.”

I don't have anything else to say, so I just stand there and look at him and try to figure out how much darkness he had swallowed. A skinny, sinewy man enters the room, dragging his feet.

"Hello, Johan," my dad says.

"Sea," says Johan.

"Louis, this is Johan. He's also a patient here. Johan, this is my son. The one I told you about."

"Sea," says Johan.

"Excuse me?" I ask, unsure that I had heard correctly.

Fritz whispers to me, "He was in a motorbike accident. Massive brain damage. 'Sea' is the only word he can say."

"Shame."

"Yes, it's bad. He was an M-student. Engineering. Was almost done with his thesis."

"Sea," says Johan.

"Sea," I reply amiably and immediately feel like an idiot. "What happened, Dad?"

"Son, Daddy didn't feel well and I accidentally took too much of my sleep medicine."

"And now?"

"Now I feel fine!"

"Sea."

"Good. That's good."

"Sea."

"Yes, Johan. How are you?"

"Sea."

"Fine, thank you."

I'm in the fucking Twilight Zone, I think. A man, older, neatly dressed, comes in.

"Johan," he says, "Where were you? I've been looking for you all over!"

"Sea," says Johan.

"You know you can't go wandering around like this."

"Sea..."

"Hi, Riaan. Sorry if Johan was bothering you."

"Not at all!" my father says. "Good bye, Johan."

"Sea," Johan says and follows the old man out.

"That's Johan's father," says Fritz. "He can't afford a nurse to look after his son at home, so Johan stays here. His dad also stays here to keep an eye on him."

“So he lives here?”

“Yes. It’s quite sad.”

“Yes,” I say. I say, “Quite sad.”

For a while we chat about unimportant day to day things and the nurse comes in. I could swear it’s the same one from the counter but now she speaks fluent Afrikaans. She puts a plastic tray down in front of him – a brown stain that might be beef or perhaps horse, rice as white and dry as bones, carrots that are more yellow than orange, and a little block that, if you go by the sickening green colour, must be dessert.

The nurse says, “Visiting hours are over.”

“Son, before you go...”

“Yes?”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Why would I be?”

“I remember I called you a while ago, but I can’t remember what I said.”

“Do you want to know what you said?”

“No.” He thinks for a while, shakes his head, and says, “No, I don’t want to know.”

“Okay.”

“Son, you have to understand that Daddy is very sick. And I do try my best. It’s all I can do. It’s all anyone can do. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“And Daddy still loves you very much and I’ll do everything I can for you, even if it isn’t much. I’ll do everything for you.”

“Okay.”

“I’m trying to get healthy again. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do you still love me?”

No.

“Yes.”

In the foyer there’s a man sitting on a bench against the wall. His hospital gown is dirty and grey. He’s playing listlessly with the plastic bangle around his arm. His hair is white and there isn’t much of it left. His feet look like they’ve been walking over kilometres of thorns, hard like tree bark. His nails are long and yellow. His eyes are pitch black and behind them there is only smoke, dust, cobwebs. His mouth is slightly open and his tongue is purple.

His skin hangs like old leather from his frame. His wrist is so skinny that he could surely slip off the bangle if he wanted to. His face is empty, expressionless. He's in the waiting area, but he's not waiting for anything – there's nothing for him to wait for. It looks like he's going to get up at any moment, let the bangle drop and walk away without anywhere to go to.

Even though they don't look remotely similar, for a brief moment I think this man is my father.

Uncertainty –

In Sydney Lumet's *12 Angry Men* (1957) a group of jurors must decide unanimously on the guilt or innocence of a young man accused of murder. Only one juror is unconvinced at the beginning and the film is the story of a turning tide as he slowly wins over the rest of the jurors. He does not accomplish this with unshakeable conviction, but rather with unshakeable doubt: it is uncertainty that leads to justice.

Girls –

There has been a recent movement to recruit females into studying STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and maths), along with many ad campaigns to this end. It is lauded for trying to erase the gender line between certain professions, and is laudable for that. But there might be something else at stake here. See for instance the recent ad from GoldieBlox, construction kit toys very similar to Meccano kits but marketed specifically to girls.¹³⁶ A girl turns to the camera with an egg, saying that “this is your brain,” a clever call back to anti-drug PSAs. “And this is your brain on Princess.” ‘Princess’ is the mentality that GoldieBlox strives against – vapid pretty girls who get nowhere in life – as we can see from the Princess egg's almost fatal fall. It is lucky that Engineering was there to catch her. All the toys are also obviously geared towards ‘what little girls like’ – pink, soft edges, little heart prints, etc. Along the egg's journey we see a few messages: “Engineering jobs are growing faster than all other jobs in the US,” and, “Female engineers earn 33% more than women in other fields.” The interest of capital is alive and well here, it is “the belief that intellectual work can be administered according to the criterion whether an occupation is necessary and reasonable.”¹³⁷ Meanwhile traditionally ‘feminised’ fields of study, the so-called ‘soft sciences,’ will become associated with female repression – a complete inversion of reality.

¹³⁶ Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArNAB9GFDog>

¹³⁷ *MM*, p. 124.

I understand and agree that girls should not be stigmatised or frightened away from maths or science if that is their interest, but is this not just the polar opposite of the ideology that keeps them out of those fields: more telling little girls what they should want to do or be? Does it not reaffirm the colour-coded gender line it is attempting to breach? There must be a way to raise children to pursue whatever interests they have, to give them a sense of autonomy. I believe we need more women in *every* field – not just those ‘guaranteed’ to make the most money. Perhaps we will be able to do so when “the division of the world into important and unimportant matters, which has always served to neutralize the key phenomena of social injustice as mere exceptions, [is] followed up to the point where it is convicted of its own untruth.”¹³⁸ So, yes, it is good to encourage girls who want to go into engineering to go into engineering – but that is not the only problem and it might create some problems of its own, and by blindly applauding an ostensibly good cause we are doing nothing to solve those issues. Using an old ideological myth so heavily in a product that is supposed to deconstruct the effects of *that very myth* is legitimate only through ignorance, or in a cynical bid for market share.

We must be very careful of where the struggle for female equality goes. Do we want women to be free to be equally exploited by an unjust system, to be equally alienated from family and community, to be equally held in thrall to corporate interests? Or do we want women to be free to express themselves to any degree, to do whatever they want without fear or intimidation, where their gender is not seen as a liability? There is radical potential in the feminist struggle, and capitalism will attempt to harness its power for itself. While it is true that no-one can be free if women are not free, it stands to reason that women cannot be free until everyone is free.

Riot –

There are some important lessons we can learn from the Moscow-based (though now international) punk band Pussy Riot. Famous for their neon tights and brightly coloured balaclavas and notorious for their illegal guerrilla performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, asking the Virgin Mary to chase Vladimir Putin away and to become a feminist, they show us the value and power of resistance art. Arrested and prosecuted (persecuted) shortly

¹³⁸ *ibid.* p. 125.

after the aforementioned event, three members were sentenced to labour camps reminiscent of Stalinist gulags. They are no ‘mere’ punk band – their work shows us that art is still capable of making those in power deeply uncomfortable, even afraid. After all, there would be no need to imprison them if the authorities believed they would be ineffectual.

Ironically it is perhaps Putin’s reaction that solidifies this view – one wonders if the Pussy Riot message would have spread across the globe in the way that it has, inspiring many splinter/tribute groups and a large amount of media attention, if they were just left alone. In a way Putin is Pussy Riot’s strongest collaborator – giving them power by trying to take their power away. Thus the lesson of Pussy Riot is twofold: the power of Art, and the deep insecurity of Power.

Refuge for the Homeless (Redux) –

Adorno said that “dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible.”¹³⁹ We can no longer feel comfortable in our own homes – the sphere of consumption has reached into what used to be our most private places. Our homes are not sanctuaries, places of rest, but “living-cases manufactured by experts for philistines,”¹⁴⁰ just the places where we while away the hours between work, our so-called ‘leisure time’. We are alienated from spaces that we call our own.

But perhaps the home was not the final frontier. On social sites like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Tumblr and others we are constantly creating new selves, performing our identities for ourselves and each other. On the internet we are finally liberated from the bonds of the physical body and can become anything we want to be, or at least gives us the illusion of radical freedom. It would appear that the internet is the best tool we have ever had for the practice of self-fashioning. Judith Butler said that “[t]here is no “I” that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no “I” that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms, which, being norms, have a social character that exceeds a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning”¹⁴¹, and Foucault said that “[f]rom the idea that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as

¹³⁹ *MM*, p. 38.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Butler, Judith. *Giving an account of oneself*. Fordham University Press, 2005. p. 7.

works of art”¹⁴². Self-fashioning, then, means coming to an awareness that our identities are constructed, and that we can (or must) deconstruct and reconstruct them as we see fit. Millions of people do exactly this every day on Facebook, though they might not be entirely aware of it. But these websites are more than just a medium for our self-expression – they are corporations. Here the waters become muddied. A site like Facebook is of course a company, but it is also the product. They have paid employees but we create the content. We are the consumer, but also the consumed. We *produce* our identities on these sites daily for the enjoyment of others, and more insidiously for the research of advertising agencies who, after tracking and analysing our data, preferences, and details, will spit out more suggestions for products for us to buy.

The products that Facebook produces are its users. We become, to use Guy Debord’s term, spectacle. Though he was by no means optimistic when he stated that “[i]n societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation,”¹⁴³ I doubt he could imagine the absurd lengths we would take this to. We have become, on a wider scale than ever before, unholy trinitities: the producer, the consumer, and the product itself. Performer, spectator, spectacle. Our every interaction has become marked by this injunction to record, to post, to archive and to ‘share’. We Instagram our lunch so that others may consume it with (and for) us. We tweet our every thought, desperately stocking ourselves on the shelves of the internet, hoping to be picked out, bought and paid for by strangers. We are beset by the fear that if we are not looked at, consumed, we may cease to exist – our identities are now external organs, the fragile exoskeletons of insects.

We cannot return, of course, to the mythical pre-internet world, and I do not propose that we make any attempt to do so. But we might look again to Adorno. If “it is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home,”¹⁴⁴ we could now say that it is part of morality not to be at home with one’s self, to constantly remind ourselves that “wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”¹⁴⁵ It is through awareness of our performance and of our spectatorship that we might break the spell of our auto-cannibalization; a slight sense of guilt, if nothing else, might help

¹⁴²in: Longford, Graham. ““Sensitive Killer, Cruel Aesthetes, and Pitiless Poets”: Foucault, Rorty, and the Ethics of Self-Fashioning.” *Polity* 33.4 (2001): 569-592.

¹⁴³ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. trans. Knabb, Ken. Rebel Press: London. 2005. p. 7.

¹⁴⁴ *MM*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

us to be more responsible in our consumption of each other – we must be conscientious cannibals.

Rubber Stamps and Machine Guns –

Papers, Please is a 2013 indie game (labelled as a ‘Dystopian Document Thriller’) created by Lucas Pope¹⁴⁶. You play as the unnamed protagonist, a citizen of the fictional Soviet state Arstotzka who has ‘won’ the ‘labour lottery’ and is assigned to the border checkpoint in the town of Grestin. You spend your days checking passports and deciding whether or not to let immigrants through, wielding your ‘approved’ and ‘denied’ stamps. You receive money based on how many applicants you correctly approve for access (you do not get anything for correctly denying people). If you incorrectly approve someone money is deducted.

As the game progresses the process becomes more complex and convoluted: where once people only needed a valid passport, they later have to be in possession of a passport, work visa, identity card, and proof of vaccination – all of which you have to check for signs of forgery and to make sure they are not past their expiration date. And, because Arstotzka continually and apparently arbitrarily starts and ends wars, you have to be up to date with the current affairs to make sure no enemies of the state are seeking entry or asylum. You get more and more options: you can ask questions, you can take fingerprints and check them against your records, you can report people for being potential terrorists (and make a deal with one of the guards to give you a kickback for every person you report) who immediately get shot, you can scan them to look for contraband hidden on their persons, you can accept bribes from desperate immigrants and so on. A ‘day’ in the game lasts about 15 minutes and you have to make sure that you process enough people in a day to be able to pay for rent, heating and food. Sometimes you will have to choose – do we eat tonight, or are we warm? Of course these choices regularly lead to a member of your family getting sick, which adds another expense to your list. If your wife or child dies because you cannot afford to feed them or buy their medicine you are arrested for failing to comply with the state’s ‘family building’ initiative. As many reviewers have pointed out¹⁴⁷ *Papers, Please* is basically a bureaucracy simulator.

¹⁴⁶ Official website here: <http://papersplea.se/>

¹⁴⁷ See, for instance: <http://indiegamerchick.com/2014/07/26/papers-please-cathys-take/>;
<http://ontologicalgeek.com/generating-tension-in-papers-please-a-case-for-ludonarrative-dissonance/>;
<http://www.pveportland.com/blog/2014/2/10/papers-please>.

The game essentially asks you to make choices – all the rage in contemporary games where your ‘morality score’ affects the outcome of the game. But *Papers, Please* does not dwell on good or evil, but exists only in areas as grey as the Soviet Bloc surroundings. Will you have this relatively innocent person shot to feed your family? Will you let the shady members of the mysterious terrorist/resistance movement through on the promise that they will get you out of Arstotzka and into a better country? Will you risk your own life to let someone with a compelling story into the country? Can you feel anything towards these thronging masses as you try to process them as quickly as possible – can you, after hundreds of applicants, still see them as humans with stories and histories?

One reviewer describes his experience of the game:

9 a.m. The checkpoint opens. I wipe the sweat off my brow and lift the iron shutter, bellowing a monotone “NEXT!” into the PA system. A woman approaches; she’s elderly. She wants entry for two weeks to visit her dying son. Her passport information is correct, she has all the appropriate vouchers, I prepare my green “accepted” stamp when I notice out of the corner of my eye a discrepancy in the seal on her entry permit. I circle it with my pen and point out the error. She breaks down, sobbing. Through her tears she blubbers out that she sold all her possessions to obtain a forged permit on the black market. She just wants to see her son. I prepare the stamp. A large red “rejected” is pressed onto the paper. I call the guards to escort her away. The next man has a clearly forged ID; the picture doesn’t even resemble him. He offers me a bribe of 20 credits. I let him through. Such is life in glorious Arstotzka.¹⁴⁸

What his description misses, though, is the fact that it is almost impossible to immerse oneself in *Papers, Please*: the graphics are terrible 8-bit retro, the soundtrack is harsh and screeching Soviet march music, the people speak in computerized grunts and mumbles, and the controls are incredibly clunky and unwieldy. All of this is intentional, of course, and allows for a more thoughtful, almost Brechtian, approach to the game. It wants you to struggle to play. It wants you to struggle, and perhaps fail, to care. It wants to give you a first-

¹⁴⁸ Available here: <http://elm.washcoll.edu/index.php/2013/09/level-up-papers-please-provokes-thought/>

hand account of the banality of evil, to show how immoral choices are made without batting an eye. Perhaps we all have it in us to be “terribly and terrifyingly normal”¹⁴⁹ – but we also might have it in us to care and to keep caring, to navigate the dark waters of morality in an immoral world, and to stand up to domination and bureaucracy and do our best to remain human even if we have to pay a heavy price for it.

Single White Male –

The Bachelor is the American ‘reality’ show, debuted in 2002 and still on air, in which a large group of women (that one critic rather accurately refers to as a ‘harem’¹⁵⁰) compete for the affections of one man, who is always rich, always handsome, and mostly white. The show currently has 18 seasons to its name. Every episode the titular bachelor must choose one of the contestants to send home, until he arrives at his final choice. Essentially the show represents love as a process of elimination, with the added benefit of a cash prize. The bachelor goes on a series of romantic dates with the women, trying to find ‘the love of his life’. He is free to pick and choose, to use and discard – he becomes the idealized Mr. Right that the women fight over, hoping to be picked, to be named the winner of his affections and the winner of the show.

Consider now the daughter show, *The Bachelorette*. Even though *The Bachelor* is quite blatantly sexist, the inherent male privilege of the show truly comes to the fore in the spin off show where the genders are reversed. The bachelorettes for the show are selected from the pool of rejected contestants in *The Bachelor*. Though we might think that the reversal of genders would also occasion the reversal of power dynamics that is sadly not the case. Whereas the Bachelor had all the power to choose the woman-object best suited to his tastes, the Bachelorette becomes again an object that the male contestants fight to obtain. In both shows only males are allowed to exercise agency.

This, fortunately or unfortunately, does not happen naturally – the creator of both shows, Mike Fleiss, and many of the contestants freely admit that the show is mostly scripted, and that unscripted material is usually edited into the planned structure. This might mean, on the

¹⁴⁹ Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Viking Press. 1968, p. 4.

¹⁵⁰ Levina, Marina. "The Surveillance of Women on Reality Television: Watching The Bachelor and The Bachelorette, by Dubrofsky, R. E. " *The Communication Review* 15.2 (2012): 159-161.

positive side, that these people are not *really* the empty husks of human beings concerned only with their own petty narcissisms and desires that they seem to be in the show. But, on the other hand, that means that the creators, producers and distributors of the show know that that is exactly what we want to see. The show's success and the fact that there are so many international versions (*The Bachelor UK*, *The Bachelor Canada*, *Der Bachelor*, and the frankly hilarious South African rip-off *Boer Soek 'n Vrou (Farmer Seeks a Wife)* to name just a few) leads me to think that we desire, for some reason, to see this bland uniformity, this pop sexism, this plastic rose romance. Adorno already observed this: "The phrase, the world wants to be deceived, has become truer than had ever been intended. People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them"¹⁵¹. Perhaps we do not want, or even deserve, anything better than *The Bachelor*.

Surveillance –

Surveillance Camera Man is an anonymous man who walks around the streets of Seattle and Providence, silently filming people¹⁵². Of course most of his subjects do not react well to this, many of them becoming aggressive, yelling, trying to knock his camera out of his hands, and sometimes physically assaulting him. Much of the media outlets that have covered his strange project refer to him as Creepy Cameraman¹⁵³.

The point that he is making, as his pseudonym implies, is one about surveillance and its ubiquity in our lives, telling one subject who asks him to stop filming that "[t]here are surveillance cameras everywhere, filming you all of the time."¹⁵⁴ We are all aware of the fact that, as Heidi Boghosian writes in *Spying on Democracy* (2013), "[f]rom the minute you wake up, your everyday activities are routinely subject to surveillance. Retailers capture consumer data and sell it to data aggregators, telecommunications companies hand over records of customer calls to government agencies, and personal data shared on social media platforms is readily available to businesses"¹⁵⁵. Surveillance has become so normalised, so

¹⁵¹ 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', in *The Culture Industry*. p. 103.

¹⁵² His LiveLeak channel here: <http://www.liveleak.com/c/SurveillanceCameraMan>. His videos used to be on YouTube, but they were all deleted and his channel blocked.

¹⁵³ See: <http://photographyisnotacrime.com/2012/10/creepy-cameraman-reemerges-as-surveillance-camera-man/>; <http://www.geekwire.com/2013/hes-back-creepy-cameraman-pushes-limits-in-new-video/>

¹⁵⁴ <http://www.dailydot.com/lol/surveillance-camera-man/>

¹⁵⁵ Boghosian, Heidi. *Spying on democracy: Government surveillance, corporate power and public resistance*. City Lights Publishers, 2013. p. 15.

naturalised, that we do not mind being watched every minute of every day through our smart phones, tablets, or laptops. We carry the Panopticon in our pockets because it promises to save us from terrorists – or more insidiously – to streamline our consumer experience¹⁵⁶.

The question then is why people react so viscerally and sometimes violently to SCM when they know they are under constant surveillance, whether it be by the state or by a corporation or institution? Perhaps it is the fact of SCM's physical body being present – he is not a detached mechanical eye even though he operates one. In a way I think he reminds people that there is someone behind every camera, and the rage that explodes is not aimed just at him but at every surveillance camera they've ever ignored.

His videos also allow us the uncomfortable opportunity to be the watcher rather than the watched. We never seem to consider the effects of surveillance on the surveiller (not the corporation or the government, but the low-level employee paid to watch). It is difficult to keep watching as people become more and more worked up, angry and stressed and the viewer is confronted with their emotional and personal vulnerability to the camera – it is no easy task to be Big Brother.

Will You Still Love Me When I'm No Longer Young and Beautiful –

One of the most viral videos of 2014 (according, no less, to *TIME*¹⁵⁷) was 'First Kiss'¹⁵⁸. The premise of the video is that they got 20 completely random strangers and asked them to kiss for the first time on camera. The strangers size each other up, making awkward small talk and giggling, then they kiss and "it's like watching fireworks, man (as barf-fully cheesy as that sounds). It's unexpectedly touching, like watching a documentary turn into a romantic comedy that doesn't suck"¹⁵⁹. It went viral almost immediately (it currently has over 90 million views on YouTube), and people were absolutely enamoured by the "strange, sweet video"¹⁶⁰.

A few days later it turned out that it was an advertisement for a clothing company called Wren, and people who had loved the ad felt cheated, disappointed and angry. On closer

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.* pp. 17-19.

¹⁵⁷ See their 'Top Ten of 2014' lists here: <http://time.com/collection/top-10-everything-of-2014/>

¹⁵⁸ Here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpbDHxCV29A>

¹⁵⁹ <http://sploid.gizmodo.com/watching-complete-strangers-make-out-is-actually-awkwar-1540921129>

¹⁶⁰ <http://time.com/21332/why-that-first-kiss-video-now-feels-like-a-bad-first-date/>

inspection, people pointed out, the people in the video were far too young, too beautiful, too stylish to truly be random strangers. The question raised here is not why a company would ‘lie’ to us (they want our money), but why we were fooled by it in the first place. I contend that it is because we all want to be young; we all want to be counted among the beautiful people. This is the mythology we have created for ourselves – nothing seems more natural to us than to be young, pretty, and privileged.

A Modest Proposal III –

People who say that we should bring back the death penalty should be given the death penalty.

Fetish –

According to Sut Jhally, in his book *The Codes of Advertising* (1990), to fetishize a commodity is to “invest it with powers it does not have in itself [...] we think that the powers a product does have belong to it directly as a thing, rather than as a result of specific human actions [labour] that give it the power in the first place [...] it is to *naturalise* a *social process*”¹⁶¹. It is to see a meaning in a commodity as intrinsic, instead of imposed and created by a social structure of meanings. This is where Jhally finds his entrance into the topic of advertising as a medium that obscures exchange-value and thus fetishizes commodities. Because much advertising only informs us of use-value, and ignores how and where it was produced, the advertised object becomes a fetish, invested with powers that are not in the object-itself, but rather that were put into it by labour. In the capitalist marketplace, Jhally says, “products appear and disappear before consumers’ eyes as if by spontaneous generation” – the methods of production are obscured, and the consumer becomes alienated from the ‘social meaning’ of the commodity because “their social character is not immediately apparent”¹⁶². Insisting that if the realities of production were to be made clear, the consumer’s interaction with the product would change dramatically (he uses the example of child labour)¹⁶³. The key quote here is:

¹⁶¹ Jhally, Sut. *The codes of advertising: Fetishism and the political economy of meaning in the consumer society*. Routledge, 2014. pp. 28-29.

¹⁶² *ibid.* p. 49.

¹⁶³ *ibid.* p. 50.

The fetishism of commodities consists in the first place of emptying them of meaning, of hiding the real social relations objectified in them through human labour, to make it possible for the imaginary/symbolic social relations to be injected into the construction of meaning at a secondary level. Production empties. Advertising fills. The real is hidden by the imaginary.¹⁶⁴

Recently the idea of commodity fetishism has taken a strange turn: we have started fetishizing products exactly for where they come from, and how they were made – now, before we buy a bag of apples, or a table cloth, or anything, we have to know whether or not it is organic, locally sourced, eco-friendly, cruelty-free etc. This, of course, is not in itself the problem – if something does even marginally less damage to you or to the planet that is a good thing. The problem enters, as always, with marketing and murky legislation.

Our cultural obsession with being ‘green’ has made it one of the most marketable lifestyles today. The colour green has come to represent, in a fetishistic way, all that is ‘organic’; the problem is that ‘organic’ has no legal definition¹⁶⁵ and has been called a “free for all”¹⁶⁶. Certification is done by many different associations, some more trustworthy than others, including ‘Participatory Guarantee Systems’ – which means that a corporation agrees to a set of guidelines, and then agrees to monitor their compliance to those guidelines themselves, pinkie promise, no funny business¹⁶⁷.

According to healthyorganic.co.za, “[p]eople believe that organic food is: safer to eat, more nutritious, [and] tastier than conventional food. As a result, people are willing to *pay a premium* for food that is organic certified”¹⁶⁸ (their emphasis). Higher prices make organic (or ‘organic’) food available only to a small minority of the world’s population, who can then sleep easy at night knowing that they have used their ‘consumer power’ to make the world a better place. Which is the sort of delusion Slavoj Žižek describes as “cultural capitalism at its purest: you don’t just buy a coffee [or a banana, or eggs], in the very consumerist act you buy

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.* p. 51.

¹⁶⁵ Even though there have been many attempts to get legislation passed. You can peruse the eighth draft of the ‘National Policy on Organic Production’ here:

<http://www.saoso.org/files/documents/National%20Organic%20%20Production%20Policy%20Draft%208.pdf>

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/SAs-organics-a-retail-free-for-all-20141006>

¹⁶⁷ <http://www.saoso.org/files/documents/Jon%202%2000%20EXECUTIVE%20SUMMARY%20-%20ORGANIC%20DEVELOPMENT%20STRATEGY.pdf>

¹⁶⁸ <http://www.healthyorganic.co.za/organic-food/>

your redemption from being only a consumerist” which leads to a “short circuit where the act of egotist consumption (and so on) already includes the price for its opposite” without ever really changing anything¹⁶⁹.

The Father of the Nation –

At the 2014 InniBos festival Afrikaans singer-songwriter, novelist, ‘activist’ and icon Steve Hofmeyr made the controversial decision to sing ‘Die Stem’, the Apartheid-era national anthem. Many thousands of people sang along (though I think he might have been exaggerating when he pegged the number at 40000¹⁷⁰). This comes after he performed the same stunt to a group of Afri-Australians on his latest tour there¹⁷¹, and got a massive amount of criticism for it. The Australian performance, I believe, is the perfect demonstration of just how incredibly regressive and moronic this ploy is: hundreds of people singing “Ons sal lewe, ons sal sterwe / ons vir jou, Suid-Afrika” (We will live, we will die / we for thee, South Africa), while living as immigrants in a ‘safer’ (read: whiter) country. So caught up in their fantastic version of history that they forget that they are neither living, dying, nor doing anything at all for South Africa. The album the song is earmarked for is called *Toeka 3*, ‘toeka’ meaning ‘the past’, and the fact that this is his third album that is entirely comprised of nostalgia and fantasy should tell us something about Steve’s views.

Of course Steve stated that the song was merely an old Afrikaans poem, nothing to do with the Nat national anthem, calling it a “sacred traditional song”¹⁷², and that it wasn’t a call to violence. His rationale is that the song is a cultural gem, and allows the poor oppressed Afrikaner to once again feel proud of his ‘heritage’. What the critics couldn’t grasp was that Steve wasn’t being a massive racist trying to revive a dead-in-the-water career with half-baked polemics; no, he was trying to rescue our culture.

Unfortunately, Steve’s supporters either didn’t get the message (or got the implied message loud and clear) and started jumping on anyone who dared criticise the stunt, especially singer-songwriter Elsabe Zietsman who distanced herself from the supposed Afrikaner

¹⁶⁹ This lecture by Žižek is very charmingly illustrated in this video by the RSA, available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpAMbpQ8J7g>

¹⁷⁰ As he said here, discussing his plans to include the song on his new album: <http://www.enca.com/steve-include-die-stem-new-ablum>

¹⁷¹ <http://citizen.co.za/210072/steve-hofmeyr-sings-die-stem-australian-fans/>

¹⁷² <http://www.women24.com/News/Steve-Hofmeyer-defiant-Die-Stem-20140709>

‘culture’ that Steve was ‘defending’. Commenters, in their infinite depth of compassion, trying to save the culture of the Afrikaner, called her a “kaffermeid” and expressed their sincere hopes that she and her children be raped and infected with AIDS¹⁷³.

At this point, most Afrikaners were wondering why we couldn’t just be proud of Etienne Leroux, or Breyten Breytenbach, or Koos Kombuis, or Bitterkomix, or Fokofpolisiekar, or any of the many other Afrikaans artists who create(d) socially responsible, progressive art. Steve’s bid to rekindle our pride has made most of us hang our heads in shame, which of course merely makes us ‘kafferboeties’, conspiring with the ‘other side’ to smother our proud heritage of ignorance and idiocy.

With the next controversy, no doubt spurred on by the uptick of video views and article hits, Steve decided to change up his tactics. Instead of doing something racist and then saying it was not racist, he dropped the pretence and tweeted “Sorry to offend but in my books Blacks were the architects of Apartheid. Go figure”¹⁷⁴. This time, though, he couldn’t deal with the consequences of his actions – comedian Conrad Koch started taking him to task, and lobbying sponsors to drop him and any festivals or concerts he was a part of. Steve, apparently unaware of the concept of irony, got an “interim protection order granted against Koch”¹⁷⁵, and sued him for ‘harassment’.

There are three possible explanations for this situation: Steve is an undiagnosed paranoid-schizophrenic and we should pity him, or Steve actually believes the vitriol he is spewing and should be put out to pasture somewhere in the Free State, or he believes he is a shrewd business man trying to drum up publicity to prop up his ailing career and someone should explain the difference between fame and infamy to him. I think it is a witch’s brew of all three – Steve, knowing that his fan base is mostly comprised of right-leaning and right-falling-over Afrikaners, decided that he did not yet have enough money and began pandering more heavily to them. His supporters, sadly, really *do* believe in this ideological combination of nostalgia, fear and hate. This leads me to think that the Boere Volk (as opposed to Afrikaners, who are just people who speak a specific language) is as a group a paranoid-schizophrenic: hearing voices telling them that shadowy forces are out to get them, hiding in

¹⁷³ <http://www.enca.com/zietsman-sparks-outcry-criticising-hofmeyr-fans>

¹⁷⁴ <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Hofmeyr-faces-Twitter-backlash-after-apartheid-post-20141028>

¹⁷⁵ <http://citizen.co.za/287275/more-heat-on-hofmeyr-afrikaans-activists/>

their fenced-in suburban bunkers, spouting incoherent nonsense, and proclaiming the end of the world as we know it.

Rebecca Davis opined¹⁷⁶ that we should give separatist racist Afrikaners their homeland on the grounds that it would keep them out of the way of the rest of us, and that the irony would be wonderful. I agree with her, but I think that the homeland would also have to be a mental institution where the Volk can be kept safely and can receive the psychological and psychiatric treatment they so desperately need, and so richly deserve.

Promised Land –

What is the most valuable lesson we can learn from the Israeli state's crimes against humanity? That those who do not learn from history are doomed to inflict it.

The End is Nigh –

The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) was founded in 1988 by the United Nations to periodically assess the causes and effects of climate change, as well as to suggest policies or programs to halt it. Their latest report, released in 2014, marked a dramatic shift in the language they use: focus has shifted away from talk of 'prevention' to talk of 'adaptation'¹⁷⁷. In other words we can no longer really 'do' anything about climate change, we just have to deal with it. The study found that "it now may be impossible to prevent the temperature of the planet's atmosphere from rising by 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit [2 degrees Celsius]. According to a large body of scientific research, that is the tipping point at which the world will be locked into a near-term future of drought, food and water shortages, melting ice sheets, shrinking glaciers, rising sea levels and widespread flooding"¹⁷⁸. At the least, life will become "increasingly unpleasant" (a euphemism for "food shortages, refugee crises, the flooding of major cities and entire island nations, mass extinction of plants and animals, and a climate so drastically altered it might become dangerous for people to work or play outside during the hottest times of the year"¹⁷⁹), and at worst the world will be "uninhabitable"¹⁸⁰.

¹⁷⁶ <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2014-11-10-op-ed-give-dan-and-steve-their-own-homeland.-please./#.VJKsQyuUeSo>

¹⁷⁷ The IPCC official press release: http://ipcc.ch/pdf/ar5/pr_wg2/140330_pr_wgII_spm_en.pdf; and if you have the fortitude to dig through mountains of jargon and science, the full report is available here: <http://ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/>

¹⁷⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/01/world/climate-talks.html>

¹⁷⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/03/world/europe/global-warming-un-intergovernmental-panel-on-climate-change.html>

It is a testament to humanity's ceaseless optimism that most people have forgotten about this report by now. That we continue to live our lives, go to work, have a drink, have children, write a thesis, do anything at all in the face of our imminent demise is proof positive that we are experts at being in denial. Perhaps if we face the fact that it is too late the world will fall into a nihilistic paralysis – which would be the appropriate response, but not a very useful one.

Perhaps the only moral choice left is to let humanity slide into oblivion, to let the human race be wiped from the planet's surface, so that the world can start again without us. Perhaps we should try, in the time we have left, to alleviate the suffering of the worst off among us. Perhaps we could redeem ourselves at least a little bit for all the horror we have created, not so that we may attain some eternal reward or forgiveness but because it would be the last ethical decision we will ever have the opportunity to make.

Or I guess we could just kill everyone and drill the last remaining drops of oil out of the earth and burn the forests down and hunt homeless people for sport and snort black tar heroin all day. Either way.

Piles –

There is a certain sad irony in the fact that Penny Siopis's masterful work *Piling Wreckage upon Wreckage* (1989) has itself become a piece of cultural wreckage in the storeroom piles of the National Gallery.

Netropolitanism –

In September 2014 a new social media site was launched. The site, Netropolitan.com bills itself as an “online country club for people with more money than time,”¹⁸¹ and promises that you can “connect to people within your social status, but outside your social circle” to chat about “everything from fine wines to classic cars to vacation destinations to literature”¹⁸². It costs a mere \$9000 to join, with a yearly subscription fee of \$3000, and is essentially Facebook/Twitter with a prohibitively high cost to keep peasants at bay.

¹⁸⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/01/world/climate-talks.html>

¹⁸¹ <https://netropolitanclub.com/>

¹⁸² <https://netropolitanclub.com/about/>

When browsing around the landing site for non-members you will find that the site aggregates news stories about itself¹⁸³, almost none of it positive (obviously), seemingly without shame or irony. In the tour section of the website,¹⁸⁴ you can view a screenshot of founder James Touchi-Peters' profile. While they were careful to scrub other users' names you can see "recent discussion topics", including gems like "Million Dollar Shoes!", "St. Croix Valley grape stomping", "Cancun & Riviera Maya", and my personal favourite, "What is "wealth", anyway?" Taken together, these things might lead you to ask whether these people are serious, and most news outlets seemed to greet the news with incredulity. It is a perfect example of Poe's Law, which states that, on the internet, parody of extremism and sincere expressions of extremism become indistinguishable. In effect, these people are so ridiculous that it becomes almost impossible to ridicule them.

Night Vale II –

Welcome to Night Vale plays powerfully with the concept of the unknown, especially with the paradoxical nature of the unknown – we can only know it in its dimension as unknown; the hidden can only reveal itself to be hidden. This is achieved through *Night Vale*'s use of familiar horror tropes, but also through its use of radio – we can hear, but never see. The medium itself forces us to imagine the unimaginable, like the walls of the dog park that go on forever when you are on the inside, or the house that seems to exist but scientifically doesn't, or the ravenous Cthulhu-like monsters that staff station management. Of course we fail at this imaginative task and cognitive dissonance is created. At the same time we only have Cecil as our guide through this strange world: there are very few 'guest speakers' or audio clips, Cecil reads everything, reports everything, even though he himself cannot see anything since the studio is windowless. The unknown reveals itself as unknown.

WTNV also uses and subverts the expectations of news – perhaps the greatest purveyor of horror in contemporary society. News, especially the 24 hour stations, do their best to keep us constantly horrified – the fascination of horror keeps us watching. Everything on cable news happens at breakneck speed. A terrorist barely has the time to blow himself up, or a tsunami the time to level a coastal village, before CNN, Fox News *et al.* have a dramatic theme tune and logo to go along with the tragedy. Chirons, scrolling updates, the buzzing of the studio at

¹⁸³ <https://netropolitanclub.com/news/>

¹⁸⁴ <https://netropolitanclub.com/tour/>

work behind the anchors, *quick cut to four-person split screen, commence inaudible yelling*. Very serious events and traumas are reduced by this treatment to pop – they are so covered in anchors, ‘specialists’, simulations, speculation, ‘quick facts’, and plasma screens that we almost never truly see the Horror of these events before they are neatly wrapped up and the next Big Threat can take its place. Worse, perhaps, is when they use this same overblown rhetoric for ‘news’ items that seem to be complete nonsense, like the now-yearly ‘war on Christmas’.

Cecil, on the other hand, confronts the horrors that invade Night Vale with his trademark impeccable calm. The warnings are dire, and the threats great, but Cecil does not look away, he does not lose his composure. He stares, in a sense, into the abyss for us. If, as Adorno said, “there is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better,”¹⁸⁵ *WTVN* represents that gaze. That is how a show that combines the horror genre with Horror news almost never seems all that horrifying. They remind us of the nature of the world: “Mostly void, partially stars.”¹⁸⁶

The Sound of Silence –

Dubstep is a subgenre of electronic dance music that began in the nineties, but reached massive mainstream saturation in 2011, mostly through the producer Skrillex¹⁸⁷. It is known by its syncopated rhythms, incredibly low bass sounds (usually in the form of the ‘wub’, as it’s known), harsh metallic leads, dark inharmonic melodies, and chopped and mangled samples. Perhaps, though, it would be best to ignore a written description and to just listen to a few tracks¹⁸⁸. After a few minutes it should be clear that dubstep shares many similarities with industrial metal, noise music, hardcore and other ‘non-mainstream’ genres. For the sake of this aphorism, it should be noted, I will mainly make reference to what is sometimes called ‘brostep’ by dubstep purists – ‘true’ dubstep has much more in common with Jamaican dub music and UK garage, while ‘brostep’ is the more aggressive and dark (sub)subgenre that hit

¹⁸⁵ *M.M.* p. 25.

¹⁸⁶ Episode 27, ‘First Date’.

¹⁸⁷ <http://www.theedgesusu.co.uk/features/2012/01/03/dubstep-how-has-it-become-so-popular/>

¹⁸⁸ Skream, ‘Midnight Request Line’ (an example of more ‘pure’ dubstep):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDU1Cy152S4>; Skrillex, ‘First of the Year (Equinox)’:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cXDgFwE13g#t=82>; Skrillex, ‘Ragga Bomb’:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eJDTcDUQxQ>; Datsik, ‘Fully Blown’:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlaAhikR4Rg>

the mainstream – though it can be said without fear of contradiction that Adorno would have hated everything about it, regardless of genre distinctions.

Mike Rugnetta makes the claim that dubstep is, in a sense, avant-garde – sharing traits with the Italian Futurists, especially Luigi Russolo “who argued that *all* sounds are musical, and that noise is really just a meaningless label”¹⁸⁹. He argues that dubstep has been able to reach such popularity despite its similarities to modernist avant-garde music because of the ways in which our sonic landscape has changed through the years, making it possible for us to accept and enjoy what was once completely hated by critics and listeners alike. While it might be true that our ears have grown more accustomed to stranger, harsher sounds, I believe this analysis might miss a deeper point. Unlike the music of modernist composers like John Cage and Lamonte Young or more contemporary fringe acts like Sunn O))) and Godspeed You! Black Emperor, dubstep (or ‘brostep’) is ideologically empty and thus completely unthreatening. It has no political, social, or historical alignment – it is noise for the sake of noise. That central emptiness is what allows it radio play, and what allows pop stars to appropriate its distinctive sound for their chart-topping hits – simply put, there is nothing there. The fact that it has already fallen out of fashion might be a testament to this. To paraphrase Tony Zhou’s analysis of Michael Bay’s oeuvre,¹⁹⁰ dubstep’s audience is aurally sophisticated, but conceptually illiterate.

***Live Corp.* –**

There is perhaps no debate as heated as the one that centres on the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in agriculture. The Institute for Responsible Technology claims that GMO foods cause “organ damage, gastrointestinal and immune system disorders, accelerated aging, and infertility”¹⁹¹. Though it should be noted that the Institute for Responsible Technology is really just one guy, Jeffrey Smith, who is not a scientist, and who bases his articles on his own books¹⁹². Most scientists at this point seem to think that GMO foods are safe to eat¹⁹³. They may even hold other benefits, as Ramez Naam says, “The scientific consensus is that GMOs are as safe to eat as any other food, that they reduce soil-

¹⁸⁹ Mike Rugnetta, ‘Is Dubstep Avant Garde Musical Genius?’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31_hy33-1Yw

¹⁹⁰ Tony Zhou, ‘What is Bayhem?’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2THVvshvq0Q>

¹⁹¹ <http://www.responsibletechnology.org/10-Reasons-to-Avoid-GMOs>

¹⁹² <http://academicsreview.org/reviewed-organizations/institute-for-responsible-technology-ifrt/>

¹⁹³ Martin, Cyrus. ‘The Psychology of GMO’, in: *Current Biology*. 23:9, 2013. 356–359.

damaging tillage, reduce carbon emissions, reduce insecticide use, and reduce the use of the most toxic herbicides in favor of far milder ones”¹⁹⁴. As Nathanael Johnson says at the end of his exhaustive series on GMOs and especially their cultural impact¹⁹⁵, “the symbol of GMOs has eclipsed the causes it symbolizes. Our urgent needs are to alleviate poverty, improve the environment, and face the fact that many of us no longer trust the people who bring us our food. Right now, our political capital is misspent if we’re only addressing GMOs narrowly without touching those larger issues”¹⁹⁶.

So what exactly are the real problems? According to many, including Dr Vandana Shiva, the real risks are engendered by the corporate control of these organisms – copyrighted life. Agribusiness giant Monsanto owns the overwhelming majority of GMO seed patents, and has worked with governments to insure their use – which leads to a decline in biodiversity, and eroded seed supply, and the yearly renewal of licences forces many small farmers into debt¹⁹⁷.

Monsanto was the subject of an antitrust (or anti-monopoly) investigation starting in January 2010 because of their near-complete control of the GMO marketplace – as the court documents stated: “Monsanto has abused its unlawfully-acquired monopoly power to block competition, thwart innovation and extract from farmers unjustified price increases of over 100 percent in recent years”¹⁹⁸ (it should also be noted that the case was brought against Monsanto by DuPont, its largest competitor). But the U.S. Department of Justice quietly dropped the case in 2012¹⁹⁹. In a strange and probably completely unrelated coincidence, Monsanto had spent over six million dollars on lobbying in that period²⁰⁰. In other words, yes, Monsanto is evil, but only in the way that every multinational corporation is evil – they want to make money at almost any cost, and they would hardly be able to do that if they routinely murdered their customer base. So the truth lies between the “frankenfood” future that some see, and the “none of this matters” view of others²⁰¹ – and it has almost nothing to do with the actual organisms and almost everything to do with capitalism. I argue that the

¹⁹⁴ <http://grist.org/food/why-gmos-do-matter-and-even-more-to-the-developing-world/>

¹⁹⁵ <http://grist.org/series/panic-free-gmos/>

¹⁹⁶ <http://grist.org/food/ok-gmos-matter-but-the-noisy-fight-over-them-is-a-distraction/>

¹⁹⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/201224152439941847.html>

¹⁹⁸ http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/28/AR2009112802471_3.html

¹⁹⁹ <http://www.motherjones.com/tom-philpott/2012/11/dojs-monsantoseed-industry-investigation-ends-thud>

²⁰⁰ <http://grist.org/news/too-big-to-prosecute-how-monsanto-slipped-the-dojs-grasp/>

²⁰¹ <http://grist.org/food/what-i-learned-from-six-months-of-gmo-research-none-of-it-matters/>

most level-headed response to the GMO controversy comes from an unlikely source: the children's film *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs 2*.

After the food storm events of the first film, our protagonist Flint, his father, and friends are evacuated from their island home of Swallow Falls to San Franjose so that the island can be cleaned up. Flint lands a dream job working for his hero Chester V at his company Live Corp., which is basically an amalgamation of Apple and Monsanto. (Their logo, by the way, is stylised as 'livE', which should give some indication of things to come).

It turns out that Flint's invention, the Flint Lockwood Diatonic Super Mutating Dynamic Food Replicator (or FLDSMDFR), which turns water into food and caused the food storm of the first film, has bonded with the ecology of Swallow Falls and creates foodimals, like shrimpanzees, watermelephants, hippopotatomases and giant cheeseburgers with french fry legs, the cheespiders. (Most of the humour comes from food-based puns). Flint and his team are sent in by Chester V to shut the FLDSMDFR down to save the island from the 'rampaging' foodimals. After a few action/adventure sequences they realise that the foodimals present no real threat, and are actually quite docile. Flint investigates and finds that Chester V is actually planning to use the FLDSMDFR to create a new version of the 'Food Bar', his flagship invention of ambiguous composition. He aims to use the new, delicious taste of the Food Bar 8.0 to monopolize the world's food supply. With the help of his friends and the foodimals Flint defeats Chester V and the island can be restored to its semi-natural, semi-modified state.

The film realises what so few in the GMO debate realise – the organisms themselves are not the problem. The problem is the way they are regulated, by whom they are used, and what they are used for – profits for Monsanto and its competitors. Flint Lockwood is essentially a biohacker, a scientist dedicated to open source science used for the benefit of the world, not controlled by a corporation whose only ethical commitment is to maximising financial gains²⁰². If we have any hope of feeding the hungry of the world with GMO crops the focus has to shift from 'is this apple making me autistic' to busting Monsanto's monopoly (and perhaps dissolving the corporation entirely) to stop them from exploiting the third world farmers that need this science the most, and to creating tighter regulations on what can and

²⁰² For a very interesting account of the burgeoning biohacker movement, I recommend Allesandro Delfanti's *Biohackers: The Politics of Open Science* (Pluto Press, 2013).

cannot be patented. Perhaps the creation and distribution of GMO's should be a government responsibility, accountable to the people.

MRA II: GamerGate –

GamerGate is an internet hate movement affiliated with the 'Men's Rights Movement' that exploded onto the scene in late 2014 after programmer Eron Gjoni published a series of blogs accusing his ex-girlfriend Zoë Quinn, also a game developer, of cheating on him and using sexual favours to gain favourable reviews of her game, *Depression Quest*. Thousands of internet trolls took this as a call to arms and began harassing Quinn and other prominent feminist figures in the world of gaming, like critic Anita Sarkeesian and developer Brianna Wu, as well as anyone that speaks even vaguely in support of feminism.

Gaters (as they are known) claim their organised hate group is really advocating for 'ethics in gaming journalism', believing that "indie game developers and the online gaming press have gotten too cozy."²⁰³ A lot of critics have stated that this supposed goal is merely a cover for their deeply misogynistic ideology,²⁰⁴ but there is a sense in which it is really their mission: in exactly the same way the Nazi's mission was about 'hygiene'.

Adorno wrote, in 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda', that

[t]he overall picture obtained [after a sustained reading of fascist pamphlets] is characterized by two main features. First, with the exception of some bizarre and completely negative recommendations: to put aliens in concentration camps or to expatriate Zionists, fascist propaganda material in this country is little concerned with concrete and tangible political issues. The overwhelming majority of all agitators' statements are directed *ad hominen*. They are obviously based on psychological calculations rather than on the intention to gain followers through the rational statement of rational aims. The term 'rabble-rouser', though objectionable because of its inherent contempt for the masses as such, is adequate in so far as it expresses the atmosphere of irrational emotional aggressiveness purposely promoted by our would-be Hitlers.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ <http://www.vox.com/2014/9/6/6111065/gamergate-explained-everybody-fighting>

²⁰⁴ <http://gawker.com/what-is-gamergate-and-why-an-explainer-for-non-geeks-1642909080>

²⁰⁵ Adorno, 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda', in *The Culture Industry*, p. 132.

One need only read the tweets or the forum posts made by gamers to see how similar they are to the fascists Adorno describes. Their language is shot through with misogyny, trans- and homophobia, anti-Semitism, and racism even when they are not making specific ideological points. A lot of their posts read like they were scribbled on bathroom walls²⁰⁶ and are clearly devoid of any rational thought – the only ideological point they have is that women are ruining games, and therefore, their ‘lives’. Their entire movement boils down to a constant screaming screed of hatred and fear – perfectly satirised by The Onion’s site, Clickhole: “One need only spend three or four hours perusing Gamergate message boards to know that the main thing members of the movement want is ethics in gaming journalism—there aren’t enough ethics, and so, one way or another, there will have to be more ethics. They might want other things too, but we had a hard time figuring out what they were. [...] The rape threats and hate speech are coming from only one, extremely vocal, extremely visible faction within Gamergate. These radical individuals distract from the main message of Gamergate. It is important to remember that the members of Gamergate, only some of whom threaten to rape and murder women, are simply fighting for ethics in gaming journalism.”²⁰⁷

Their tactics include using unending rape and death threats to harass women out of gaming and off of social media, and leaking personal information like addresses and phone numbers (this is called ‘doxxing’) to scare women out of their homes.²⁰⁸ Someone threatened to massacre the attendees of a conference if they allowed Anita Sarkeesian to speak there.²⁰⁹ They leaked and spread nude pictures of Quinn, at one point flooding her father’s inbox with the pictures, essentially turning her own body into a weapon to be used against her²¹⁰. They regularly use DDOS (distributed denial of service) attacks on news sites that are vocally anti-gamergate (anti-hate speech). They even created a teenage ‘gamer girl’ avatar called Vivian James to show (somehow) that they aren’t ‘anti-women’, only ‘anti-feminist’ – and because they can’t seem to help themselves, Vivian James was almost immediately ‘Rule 34ed’: made

²⁰⁶ Their ‘planning’ sessions: <http://wehuntedthemammoth.com/2014/09/08/zoe-quinn-screenshots-of-4chans-dirty-tricks-were-just-the-appetizer-heres-the-first-course-of-the-dinner-directly-from-the-irc-log/>; a caricature of Anita Sarkeesian in the style of *actual* Nazi propaganda: <http://wehuntedthemammoth.com/2014/11/02/why-are-gamergaters-so-quick-to-excuse-an-anti-semitic-caricature-of-anita-sarkeesian-thats-literally-derived-from-nazi-propaganda/>

²⁰⁷ <http://www.clickhole.com/article/summary-gamergate-movement-we-will-immediately-cha-1241>

²⁰⁸ <http://www.motherjones.com/media/2014/10/gamergate-explained>

²⁰⁹ <http://www.theverge.com/2014/10/14/6978809/utah-state-university-receives-shooting-threat-for-anita-sarkeesian-visit>

²¹⁰ <http://www.bustle.com/articles/40867-gamergate-trolls-harassed-zoe-quinn-for-weeks-but-she-says-she-wont-stop-fighting>

into pornography, most of it in a rape and bondage vein.²¹¹ They are essentially using cyber-terrorist tactics to support and impose a strangely gendered version of fascism.

Sub –

In *The Sacred and the Profane: An Investigation of Hipsters* Jake Kinzey makes the point that

[a]s the 1970s dragged on it became clear to many that subculture had been institutionalized. [...] To a newly emerging group later known as the punks, this was a completely unacceptable state of affairs. They were part of the postmodern shift in music, the other two important genres being hip-hop and techno. [...] Attaching themselves to the raw and the visceral, punk wanted to be a complete negation of everything the system stood for [...] Wherever they were located, punks wanted to avoid selling-out like the hippies and other subcultures before them. They “promised to build a scene that could not be taken [over and co-opted]. Its anger, pleasures, and ugliness, were to go beyond what capitalism and bourgeois society could swallow. It would be untouchable, undesirable, unmanageable.”²¹²

Of course, we know that the punk dream of autonomy would fail. You can get your torn jeans and studded leather jackets at your local Cotton On or The Lot. Punk like almost all other genres/subcultures quickly became just another statement of ‘coolness’, another fashion fad that would come and go and perhaps come back a few years later in a sterilised form. This is what has happened to Rock ‘n Roll, to Punk, to Hip-Hop, to Grunge. All ostensibly anti-consumerist movements eventually become consumer products, signifiers of ‘trends’.

Except one, perhaps.

Black Metal is a subgenre of metal that got its start in the late eighties and early nineties in Norway in reaction to the corporatized nature of heavy metal at the time. The first bands to emerge, Mayhem, Burzum, Darkthrone *et al.* pioneered the look and style of both the

²¹¹ <http://www.cracked.com/blog/7-ways-gamergate-debate-has-made-world-worse/>

²¹² Kinzey, Jake. *The Sacred and the Profane: an investigation of hipsters*. John Hunt Publishing, 2012. pp. 30-31.

subgenre and the subculture: black leather with giant spikes, faces painted to look like corpses, the high pitched scream that is somewhere between pain and anger, the low production quality, tempos that are either breakneck or sludge, and the overwhelming sense of ‘anti’ness²¹³. They are anti-Christian (usually advocating for Satanism or paganism), anti-consumption, anti-humanity, anti-aesthetic, and even anti-self – for instance, when founding member of Mayhem, Per ‘Dead’ Ohlin shot himself in 1991, his bandmate Øystein ‘Euronymous’ Aarseth took pictures of the scene to use as an album cover²¹⁴ and made necklaces out of the skull fragments²¹⁵.

This complete and unrelenting extremeness of Black Metal’s nihilism makes it a *total* negation – not only of capital, but of their own project and of life itself. In his book *In the Dust of This Planet*, Eugene Thacker traces the philosophical and theological roots of the ‘black’ in Black Metal. He highlights the blackness of Satanism that sets itself as the opposition to Christianity and the accuser of human society, as well as the blackness of paganism as a pre-Christian and marginalised alternative. But he comes to the conclusion that that is not all there is to it. In Black Metal’s sonic aesthetic he also finds a Schopenhauerian *Wille* – the nature of the universe as “impersonal, blind, and indifferent to our wants and desire. There is no nature-for-us, much less any being-on-the-side-of-nature. Furthermore, the *Wille* is, in itself, “nothing,” a gulf at the heart of the world as *Vorstellung*”²¹⁶. He posits, then, that the real meaning of the ‘black’ in Black Metal is “not Satanism with its opposition/inversion and dark technics, not paganism with its exclusion/alterity and dark magic, but a Cosmic Pessimism, with its dark metaphysics of negation, nothingness, and the non-human.”²¹⁷ It can never be trendy, it can never be co-opted, but it will also remain forever inaccessible. Therein lays the double bind: the Black Metal pioneers have been so successful in their project of remaining outsider figures that they will never be able to make much of a difference.

²¹³ The official video for Gorgoroth’s ‘Carving a Giant’ shows many of the aesthetic, musical and thematic elements of Black Metal: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ba0K-4D1Lj0>.

²¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dawn_of_the_Black_Hearts

²¹⁵ For a fascinating look at the early history of Black Metal, please see the 2008 documentary by Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell, *Until the Light Takes Us*.

²¹⁶ Thacker, Eugene. *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy*. Vol. 1. John Hunt Publishing, 2011. p. 21.

²¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 22.

An Immodest Proposal –

Set up a government run bank. Provide every citizen of South Africa a Universal Basic Income of R6000 per month, tax free, adjusting with inflation each year. Income tax will range from 20% to 90%, on a scale that greatly favours the working and middle classes, and taxing the richest heavily (they'll still be the richest after taxes, of course, but at least they will be contributing their fair share). Corporate tax will also be greatly increased, especially on multi-nationals, banks, mines, fossil fuels, and any and all other harmful businesses. Businesses can get tax breaks for meeting certain sustainability and equity goals – for example, a business that is off the electricity grid, grows or makes their own products, is worker-owned and –run, and makes a positive impact in their community through education, training, outreach, arts and culture, etc., will pay a miniscule amount of taxes. On the other hand, a corporation like Monsanto would be charged at least 90%.

Children also receive the UBI, but it is deposited each month into their government-issued bank account. The accumulated funds will be released on the child's nineteenth birthday and should be in excess of R1 million. The funds will only be released after they have consulted with a financial advisor on how best to spend the money. Any help the citizen needs in terms of purchasing a house, starting a business, or paying for tertiary education will also be provided as necessary. A module of grade 12 Life Orientation will be dedicated to constructing a balanced and sensible budget.

This immense socio-economic program will largely be funded through the legalization and commercialization of cannabis for recreational and medical use.

South Africa will be the most equitable, fair, and prosperous society in the world. Other developing nations will imitate us. All problems will be solved and we will finally live in utopia.

Five Theses on Infomercials –

I: Introduction -

I am willing to wager that any living person with access to a television has seen more infomercials than they care for, even if they have only seen one. Infomercials are those advertisements pretending to be shows, hiding out at the fringes of air-time: late-night, early-morning, daytime. One almost never sees an infomercial in its natural habitat with a clear mind – you have either just woken up, or you never went to sleep in the first place, or you're stuck at home with the flu. But there they are with their pastel colour schemes, the sets designed to be as inoffensive as humanly possible. And there are the presenters with their forced rictus grins, their teeth looking like they've never been used for anything except smiling, telling you forcefully but cheerfully that what you've been missing in your life is the brand-new never-before-seen Ultra Mega Ab Blaster™, or the Chop-o-Matic 53K™, or the Zero Gravity Frying Pan™. 'You there, you in the pyjamas, you could finally attain your ideal self, transcend your weaknesses, and become the Übermensch – if you would only call *right now* and purchase this SuperSeal MagicBowI™ for the low-low price of R99.99.'

But that's not all. Infomercials seem to have an inherent instability – perhaps because of their conceptually empty genre-mashing: between the commercial and the talk show, between advertisement and educational program. The black and white 'before' scenes resemble the dramatic reconstructions of low-budget true crime shows – except instead of a grisly decapitation, these people can't seem to get a handle on their bread. If you look closely enough you will see how flat and cheap the sets are. You will see the harsh studio lighting drawing out beads of sweat on the presenters' badly made-up faces, the manic repetition of the product's supposed qualities as if trying to call forth an Elder One. The tone of the 'satisfied customer' testimonials range from 'a gun is being held to my head' to 'I have drunk the Kool Aid and it was delicious', and the 'celebrity' endorsements are usually from someone like the 1995 semi-finalist of a local strongman competition. We might be forgiven for wondering exactly how effective these infomercials are, and whether people are convinced by the pseudo-science and bad puns. But, of course, they must be effective or they would not exist. Research indicates that the purchases are mostly impulsive and not very well

thought through²¹⁸, which should come as absolutely no surprise to anyone. Infomercials are where the flashy neon membrane of marketing ruptures and we can look in. These ads do not flash by on a billboard, they don't last thirty or sixty seconds, sowed between acts of TV programming. They go on for anything between thirty minutes and two hours and become by necessity very thinly spread.

It would seem that the infomercial would be ripe for satire, and while there are many infomercial skits to be found on the internet and late night comedy shows²¹⁹, they mostly amount to little more than flat satire, a pastiche of infomercial tropes that most of the time just end up saying, 'infomercials sure are silly'. They are not necessarily completely unfunny, but they are completely forgettable. But in 2013 the channel Adult Swim (stylised as [adult swim] or [as]) began airing infomercial parodies in their 4 a.m. timeslot. These ran for about a week at a time and then quietly disappeared. In late 2014 one of these, *Too Many Cooks*, became a giant viral sensation and people's interest in the other *Infomercials* was sparked.

These parodies, unlike the others floating around, tend to take a much sharper aim at infomercials and their underlying premises and ideological foundations, doing their very best to dismantle the corporate messages from within. Almost every *Infomercial* makes use of Adult Swim's trademark absurd, surreal, and dark humour, and employs horror imagery to hammer the point home. The basic format of the infomercial becomes so darkly warped that it invariably breaks down completely, ending in the death of all persons involved. Some, like *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, cannot even be readily described as comedy, and would fare better under the heading of 'experimental short film'. Many bloggers and major news outlets have written about *Infomercials*, especially *Too Many Cooks*, but very few of them make any real analysis beyond 'it is really, really weird and I don't get it, but it's really popular right now, so you should watch it'²²⁰, and many of the articles are as banal as the infomercials

²¹⁸ Martin, Brett AS, Andrew C. Bhimy, and Tom Agee. "Infomercials and advertising effectiveness: an empirical study." *Journal of consumer marketing* 19.6 (2002): 468-480. p. 468-490.

²¹⁹ For instance, Arnold Schwarzenegger hyping the 'Choppa' on Jimmy Kimmel Live (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2BZCW4SpHE>), Jim Carrey selling the 'Juice Weasel' on In Living Color (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b21MQqHthPs>), or Tina Fey and Ellen DeGeneres improvising an infomercial skit on Ellen (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_yySBY1qdc).

²²⁰ From Gawker: <http://gawker.com/have-you-stumbled-on-this-endless-sitcom-credit-nightma-1655641375>; from AV Club: <http://www.avclub.com/article/adult-swims-latest-weird-infomercial-deeply-unsett-213127>; from CNN: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/09/living/too-many-cooks-video/>.

being parodied²²¹. Here I will attempt to provide more thoughtful analyses of four [as] *Infomercials* (*Broomshakalaka*, *The Book of Jesus*, *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, and *Too Many Cooks*) to try and see what they tell us about infomercials specifically and about marketing in general, as well as the specific themes and issues that each *Infomercial* addresses.

What I want to reaffirm here is the oft-ignored power of satire as an analytic tool and as a potentially powerful force of resistance and negation, and as such I will not be ‘critiquing’ the *Infomercials* as much as I will be unpacking *their* (incredibly dense and complex) critiques of middle-class white society. These short films then become keys with which we can enter some complex issues, and with them gain a greater understanding of life in the marketplace. Even though, as Stuart Hall writes, these films might be “dramatic and ‘meaningless’ within the consensually validated norms,” they nonetheless “pose a challenge to the normative world. They render problematic not only how the world is defined, but how it ought to be.”²²²

II: *Broomshakalaka* –

What *Broomshakalaka*²²³ seems to do best is highlight the underlying desperation, the buzzing nervous energy of the infomercial. The sketch begins with a slow zoom out from close up of the presenter as he presents a dark, dramatic riddle: “I am the destroyer of mountains, the killer of kings. I always fly by, yet I don’t have wings. I can end basketball games or marriages with similar ease, and though I flow like a stream, only water can freeze. I’ve murdered children and parents and houseplants galore, yet despite all this you always want more. Who am I?” The tension is comically undercut when the lights come on and he introduces himself as “Denny Boffa, amateur riddle writer, former father, and inventor of the *Broomshakalaka*.” The ‘former father’ line alerts us to the fact that all is not entirely well, but there isn’t much time to think about it as Denny, aided by his guests Mark and Eileen, begins his hard-sell pitch.

The fact that he is not as polished as real infomercial presenters allows us to see his nervousness as he rushes and stumbles over his lines and pauses in awkward places in the script. He promises that the *Broomshakalaka* will save its users endless amounts of time –

²²¹ Like this ‘mind blowing’ flow chart, courtesy of some guy at Vanity Fair’s brother: <http://www.vanityfair.com/vf-hollywood/2014/11/too-many-cooks-flow-chart>.

²²² Hall, Stuart. ‘Deviancy, Politics and the Media’.

²²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zt2uIhAvQZ8>

something that many infomercials promise. This insistence on time-saving alerts us to the aspirational component of advertising – they aren't really selling a product, they are selling you *your own time* which you can use to finally achieve your dreams. They are vultures preying on the '*if only I had more time I could...*' sentiment of the over-worked and the under-paid. *Broomshakalaka* shows the absurdity of this time-as-commodity pitch: Denny promises that the Broomshakalaka will save you a grand total of nine hours a year – a completely insignificant amount. The Broomshakalaka's all-in-one design also pokes fun at similar objects in the real commercial world – it can do so many things that it ends up not being able to do anything.

The infomercial trope of the consumer being completely useless without the product – think of the grainy black and white re-enactments of people somehow managing to crush a loaf of bread into pulp while attempting to slice it or the pathological clumsiness of anyone within an arm's reach of a drink – is also satirised when Eileen 'accidentally' drops a bowl of ash on the carpet. The trope takes a darker turn, though, when Denny accidentally lops off his own hand and insists on continuing with the show. This sudden irruption of real violence cannot be adequately contained by the format, and the infomercial begins to descend into chaos. Though the cameras keep rolling, the position of the viewer becomes much more voyeuristic, aided by the fact that the camera's movements now appear more erratic and unplanned. The smooth surface of media has been pierced and we are looking at its organs.

When Denny reveals why he so desperately wants to sell the apparently arbitrary number of 2550 brooms, the time-commodity becomes more layered: "The average American life expectancy is 77 years point 97. That's 11220 days. I need to sell 2550 brooms. That's the equivalent of one life. That's the equivalent of my little... my little daughter's life." It is also revealed that this tragedy has been on the fabric of the commercial since the beginning – the spilled ashes are in fact little Jenny Boffa's remains, dispersed by the Broomshakalaka throughout the clean pastel studio. Denny seems to believe that 'saving time' can also mean 'reclaiming time' and thus bring his daughter back from the dead. Mark is understandably horrified, but Eileen also feels Denny's sense of non-closure with regards to her deceased dog French Fries.

Just before Denny dies of his numerous wounds he asks Eileen to use the Broomshakalaka's tattoo removal laser mode to erase a tattoo of Jenny from his stomach. Mark can bear it no

longer and tries to smash the broom, chopping up many parts of the studio with the laser in the process. This mode, the most violent and destructive aspect of the Broomshakalaka, immediately turns into its greatest selling point and we can see the ‘brooms sold’ figures in the corner of the screen skyrocket. When it hits the magic number of 2550 there is a bright light, some smoke, and Jenny appears. Not long after Denny is also brought back to life, and a resurrected French Fries also makes a brief appearance. The low production quality of this ending (for instance the obvious smoke machine smoke) makes it ambiguous. Does the act of buying a Broomshakalaka truly hold power over life and death? Or was the entire show, including the dismemberments and fires, a staged attempt to grab an apathetic audience’s attention? Either way, the end leaves us feeling disappointed, empty. As if we’ve just wasted eleven minutes of our lives.

III: Book of Christ –

*Book of Christ*²²⁴ centers around a newly discovered text, apparently written by Jesus Christ Himself, a new and exciting addition to the other texts referred to as “humanity’s greatest books”: the Bible, the Qur’an, Plato’s *Republic*, the Bhagavad Gita, *Dianetics* by L. Ron Hubbard, and *Mein Kampf*. The latter two books’ presence in the list reminds us that even if a text is deemed sacred, it is still a social and ideological construction. The implication, of course, is that the Bible is no better or worse than *Mein Kampf* – the playing field is levelled.

The main conflict in this *Infomercial* is between the text’s banality and meaninglessness, and the presenters’ unwillingness to accept that it is banal and meaningless, either because of their belief in Christianity or because they have to make sure the book gets sold (their belief in capitalism).

The very first quote we see from the Book of Christ is “To throw things at a bird is no sin,” and it only gets worse from there. The re-enactments of the book genre-swap – from doctrinal additions (like the “Holy Hendecogy” consisting of the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, God’s Lungs, the Four Big Men, and the Immortal Bug), to a diary, to an addiction memoir, a recipe book, a confessional autobiography, and finally a ‘self-help’ guide to picking up women (closely mirroring the techniques of contemporary ‘pick up artists’). As we continue the journey into the text, the character of Jesus as it is portrayed in the Book of Christ

²²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRegUuydEUg>

becomes less and less likable – a murderer, a drunk, a misogynist and a narcissist. The presenters do not seem to pick up on the awfulness of the text, even when they eat fish made according to Jesus’ recipe and it turns out to be nearly inedible. The pastor character says, “I like it. I have faith that God would have wanted this much lemon. Not everything has to be drowned in barbeque sauce,” even as he cringes from the acidity. He cannot allow himself to accept that Jesus was a bad cook because if he did his entire ideological apparatus of Christianity-as-Capitalism would fall apart – he needs the Book of Christ, and thus Jesus Christ himself, to be a high quality product he can sell to his congregation.

Throughout the infomercial, the presenters become more and more disorientated, sweaty, and flustered. They are slowly being choked by the argon gas that is used to preserve the scroll. Although argon is perfectly non-toxic it displaces oxygen and causes asphyxiation. Even when their teeth start falling out and their noses start bleeding, the presenters refuse to believe that it could be because of the gas they are filling the room with, neatly mirroring the way they refuse to believe that Jesus was a terrible person. The argon’s evacuation of oxygen becomes a metaphor for capitalism’s evacuation of meaning. It is interesting to note that the other people in the studio, the producers, technicians, and camera operators, are all wearing thick hazmat suits.

By the time the ‘scientific audio simulation’ of Jesus’ cough plays the presenters are all but dead. The cough, though it is just a cough, becomes harsh and grating with repetition. The presenters find a sense of religious stupor in the noise, and die. Their ideological blindness leads to their physical death in the end.

IV: Too Many Cooks –

*Too Many Cooks*²²⁵ begins as a completely flat pastiche of sit-com intro sequence tropes: the happy suburban family, the cheery song, the stereotypical characters all introduced with a freeze frame of them smiling directly at camera adorned with yellow chrons. All of this, along with the VCR tracking marks, evokes a sense of the 80s and 90s nostalgia that is very fashionable today. As the introduction becomes longer and longer it becomes funny, and then strange. There are markers that all is not entirely well, for example the swinging couples in the previously monogamous suburban utopia. The intro begins to switch genres – the office

²²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrGrOK8oZG8>

comedy, the cop show, the Saturday morning cartoon. This all still feels completely natural for the skit's tone of 80s and 90s nostalgia, but there is a definite turning point when it switches to a Dallas/Dynasty-type intro. The intentionally irritating repetition of the opening melody and shot of a falcon signifies that something is changing. Here we are introduced (though we have glimpsed him before) to Bill, the psychopathic killer that will dominate the rest of the video. It is interesting to note that his killing spree, while indiscriminate, begins with the richest and most aristocratic characters. Bill's name is never given in the *Infomercial* itself, but is included on the IMDb page.²²⁶ I will refer to him as 'Bill' for the sake of easier reading, but it is important to keep in mind that he is nameless.

As Bill's slaughter of the characters begins, the previously unthreatening VCR glitches and slightly distorted relentlessly cheerful music takes on a more sinister tone, as does the canned laughter in the background. Katie Adkins manages to somehow escape her freeze frame and runs off-set. Though she is running through the studio in which the show is made, revealing the constructed nature of sitcoms, her chiron remains fastened. And it is exactly this chiron, her marker of identity in the sitcom world, that gives her away to Bill as she hides in the closet.

After Katie is murdered the show becomes even more horrific – Bill disposes of almost every character we've met before and takes their places, his chiron always so glitched that we cannot uncover his identity. He literally and figuratively consumes them and their roles and becomes a twisted and gory satire of the form. He shows that any utopian ideal, no matter how carefully constructed, inevitably devolves into a bloodbath. As he takes his place at the center of the show its internal logic begins to break down – form and genre clichés begin to meld and fold into each other and break down almost completely, as attested by the chiron-people subtitled with people-chirons. Bill is the eruption of the irrationality and fear that is always-already under the surface veneer of the suburban fantasy. We can see this at the very end, with the final family photograph: in the exposure the father is replaced by Bill in a *The Shining*-esque way – Bill is inside each character, inside the show itself. He always has been.

²²⁶ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3534838/>

V: Unedited Footage of a Bear –

*Unedited Footage of a Bear*²²⁷ is in my opinion the most interesting of the *Infomercials*. It begins inconspicuously enough with exactly what is promised in the title, but is soon interrupted by a YouTube ad for Claridryl, the fictional medication that acts as the catalyst in this film. When you click the ‘Skip Ad’ button you are instead taken to Claridryl’s ‘official website’.²²⁸ The ad itself is a razor sharp and accurate parody of pharmaceutical advertisements: the violently inoffensive jingle, the happy smiling people, the vague promises and pseudo-science (“Take your life in your hands!”, “So you can get back to what matters most!”), the grey filter tone for the ‘before’ scenes, and the perfunctory government-mandated listing of side effects. Compared to a recent ad for the very real Tamiflu²²⁹ – which includes the bizarre and terrifying warning of “signs of unusual behaviour” – Claridryl seems only marginally more absurd. After the commercial ends things take a very dark turn, as we can expect from the *Infomercials* by now.

As Mom (as the role is credited) drives down the road, we see blocks of houses that all look exactly the same in some utopic suburb. We hear the narrator list some of the side effects of Claridryl: “dry mouth, dizziness, double vision, reflexive memory, aggression and fatigue. Do not use if you suffer from high blood pressure or neurological dysfunction. Call your doctor if you experience an inability to concentrate, stiff muscles, sores, or trouble walking. Do not take Claridryl before going to bed or immediately upon waking up.” As he continues, the fantasy of the commercial is gradually toned down to the underlying reality.

When the narration fades into the diegetic sound of the car radio, we see that Mom is desperately addicted to Claridryl, empty bottles littering the passenger seat and floor. She drives past a crime scene at one of the clone-like houses and we see a clearly deranged man being detained near a blanket-covered corpse. The camera does not linger long, but we can just make out that the man and the corpse are wearing exactly the same colourful sneakers: the screaming man has clearly lost his battle against the effects of Claridryl. The mother’s future is foreshadowed – Claridryl is not affecting only her, she is just next in line.

²²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gMjJNGg9Z8>

²²⁸ <http://www.adultswim.com/promotions/claridryl/>

²²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daR6AI0gX7o>

The following few sequences – the fight with her duplicate, the strange behaviour at home, the borderline child abuse, underscored at many points by the harsh and abrasive song ‘Sermon’ by Ed Schrader’s Music Beat – are more consistent with the horror genre than any other *Infomercial*. Thomas Ligotti writes a passage on a Lovecraft story that resonates with *Unedited Footage* as well: “In Lovecraft’s novel, the universe cares nothing for human life, just as in the real world, and one does not care about the characters – they are only a perspective from which to view the horror of the plot. [...] Good and Evil are rubrics of an existential code long gone, just as in the real world. [...] Everyone, not only the hapless protagonist of the book, exists in a world that is a wall-to-wall nightmare.”²³⁰ The commercial is the pretence that the world is meaningful and that it is coherent. The bland over-produced music tells us that everything is okay. The identical houses with their solar panels tell us that everything is okay. Claridyl promises that everything that isn’t okay can become okay (after you purchase and consume it, of course). It is a fragile glue that binds the world together, liable to fail at any point, as it does in the film. The world as Mom knows it crumbles in her hands and everything once familiar and safe becomes threatening, alien, and uncanny. Everything that once gave meaning, or the illusion of meaning, is ripped away and she falls into an unrelenting psychosis – she has stared too long into the abyss.

In *Too Many Cooks* Bill, although he is in some ways an insider, remains Other to the sit-com dream in which he is the antagonist. In *Unedited Footage of a Bear* the duplicate, our antagonist, is identical to the protagonist mother. In fact, we are unsure whether there really is a duplicate, or whether we are experiencing the mother’s disassociation brought on by Claridryl subjectively and thus seeing her hallucinations. If *Unedited Footage* is more frightening or in some way darker than the other *Infomercials* it is because it is more realistic, or at least not outside of the realm of possibility. The hidden, repressed dangers of the suburbs have many victims.

A Modest Proposal IV –

Anyone who wishes to criticise Adorno’s thoughts on Jazz must do so while listening to a Michael Bublé Christmas album.

²³⁰ Ligotti, Thomas. *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. Hippocampus Press, 2010. pp. 203-204.

The Greatest Love of All (I Believe the Children are Our Future) II –

On June the 17th 2015, in the wake of months of unrest and protests of police killings of Black civilians, 21 year old Dylann Roof killed 9 black churchgoers,²³¹ apparently in an attempt to spark a race war. The big media sensation was when photos were unearthed of the shooter with Apartheid South African and colonial Rhodesian flags on his jacket. Many, many think-pieces were instantly written immediately to try and figure out how this Southern USA youth was ideologically linked with the recent past of Southern Africa – as Max du Preez writes, “[i]n short: at the heart of apartheid was the belief that a black life was worth less than a white life. Dylann Roof believes that too,” and compares him to South African spree-killer Barend Hendrik Strijdom.²³² But not everyone was convinced by this rather clear and obvious argument. The sleuths of the South African fascist party Front Nasionaal (who won a staggering 0.03% of the vote in the 2014 election) uncovered a CIA conspiracy against the Boerevolk – Roof’s badges had been photoshopped to blacken the good name of the racist, sexist, deluded Afrikaner nationalist movement. After some technical wizardry from the Boerestaat’s brightest minds, they revealed the *true* badge on Roof’s jacket: the Democratic Party’s logo.²³³

Even though their ‘real’ photo was so clearly edited a three-year-old would doubt its veracity, Front Nasionaal stuck to their guns. Imagine their surprise when Roof himself admitted his spree was a premeditated hate crime. Journalists also found his website on which he had posted his manifesto, in which he held the Apartheid regime up as a good example to all aspiring segregationists: “Some people feel as though the South is beyond saving, that we have too many blacks here. To this I say look at history. The South had a higher ratio of blacks when we were holding them as slaves. Look at South Africa, and how such a small minority held the black in apartheid for years and years.”²³⁴ Some journalists at the LA Times found a striking resemblance between the language Roof uses, and the language of fascist forum boards like Storm Front and Daily Stormer.²³⁵

²³¹ <http://www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/dylann-roof-and-a-night-of-hate-in-charleston>

²³² <http://www.news24.com/Columnists/MaxduPreez/Dylann-Roof-shares-apartheids-ideology-20150623#>

²³³ <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Right-wing-party-claims-flags-on-Roofs-jacket-were-photoshopped-20150622>

²³⁴ <http://lastrhodesian.com/data/documents/rtf88.txt> [no longer online]

²³⁵ <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-dylann-roof-web-20150622-story.html>

On these sites semi-tech-savvy skinheads can come together in enlightening discussions about how bad Black people are, and how much they dislike Black people (almost as much as ‘libtards’, Jews, homosexuals, women, and communists). It takes only a despairing 5 minutes to find that there are hundreds of local boards for South Africans. Here South Africa’s racist brain-trust can tell other fascists about how wonderful the Good Old Days were, and how strong the White Man used to be, and how well we subjugated Black people. Their stories essentially become the worst possible kind of 80s nostalgia, gripping young men like Roof with Aryan fairy tales.

The Greatest Love of All II (Redux) –

The other side of this cultural exchange is thankfully much more positive. After the murders of many Black Americans by the police, many took to the streets in a protest campaign that became known as Black Lives Matter. This surge in popular Black Consciousness was reflected culturally, for example in Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly*, D’Angelo and the Vanguard’s *Black Messiah*, in the sketch comedy of Key & Peele, in millions of tweets and in thousands of Youtube videos. Almost immediately, and perhaps bolstered by the Black Americans’ show of determination, the Rhodes Must Fall campaign began at UCT, and spread throughout the country, the other prominent movements being Open Stellenbosch and the Black Students’ Movement at Rhodes University. All these local movements draw heavily upon the works and philosophy of Steve Biko, who was himself largely influenced by the writers and thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as Frantz Fanon and other postcolonial thinkers. A large focus of these student movements is getting rid of statues and other relics of colonialism and Apartheid in a bid to decolonize the University and other public spaces.

Now, in the wake of the Carolina massacre, students in Texas are calling for the removal of Confederate statues and flags from universities and public buildings.²³⁶ Graffiti similar to South Africa’s has also been sprayed on many statues and buildings in the Southern States.²³⁷ America’s influence on South Africa (like the rest of the world) is clear, but it is also becoming clear that South Africa (like the rest of the world) also has an influence on America.

²³⁶ <http://kut.org/post/students-call-removal-jefferson-davis-statue-ut-campus>

²³⁷ <http://www.wkyt.com/wymt/home/headlines/More-states-seeing-Confederate-statues-defaced-309358991.html#poldal137028633>

Popping Bubbles –

The internet has the potential to be a wild and anarchic space – and in many places it still is, but mostly these days as a sort of foundational myth of internet culture. In truth, most people only use a few trusted sites and do not wander too far afield. We have every fact, every idea, everything we could ever want to know in our pockets and yet most people never get to see much of it. With the massive amount of data on the internet, one of the biggest challenges facing users is how to sift through and organise that data into usable and understandable information. In turn, this impulse also creates and organises communities.

Though there was already a massive amount of information available on the web ever since its introduction to individual users and creators, it was much more difficult to find exactly what you were looking for on clunky old search engines. Before Facebook, Google, Yahoo *et al* essentially monopolised internet traffic, many of the most popular sites like 4chan’s infamous /b/ board and other similar boards had/have their own dialect that might seem completely foreign to outsiders – whole new languages that have sprung up to foster a sense of community between mostly anonymous or at least pseudonymous individuals. These were niche groups, with not much exposure to the outside world – echo chambers that lead to an almost extremist form of confirmation bias. Despite this, these sites were thriving with dynamism. Because posts were not archived users tried to push the limits of good taste, of humour, of art, to their utmost to remain on the front page a while longer. Anonymity allowed users to speak their minds freely without fear of discrimination, or to experiment with other social roles (swopping and performing gender/race/class/etc.). Because of both these factors people had to rely on others’ use of language to pick them out as fellow community members. This is the starting point of the now ubiquitous ‘meme’ – if someone could triforce it meant they were an oldfag, not cancer. If someone jokingly started threatening you with his 30 years of Navy Seals training, you knew they hung out in the same places, shared the same interests. Because there were no visual or aural clues as to someone’s identity, language – especially its highly affected use and abuse – was what created cohesive online societies.²³⁸

²³⁸ For some very engaging historical accounts of this side of the internet, please see: Olson, Parmy. *We are anonymous: Inside the hacker world of LulzSec, Anonymous, and the global cyber insurgency*. Little Brown, 2012. and Stryker, Cole. *Epic win for Anonymous: how 4chan's army conquered the Web*. Penguin, 2011.

This anarchic, free-form version internet is now all but extinct in the mainstream. Since the rise of social media most websites require that you use your real name, and encourage you to keep everything interconnected: login into Facebook using your Gmail account, follow a link to a YouTube video, log into YouTube with your Google+ account (that came free with your Gmail account), share it to Twitter (which is also linked to your Facebook and your Instagram and your Pinterest) etc. All the while these services are tracking your movement across the web, taking note of what you are apparently interested in. These numbers get crunched through proprietary algorithms, used by sites to ‘personalize’ your browsing experience, to give you more of what you want. This is what is referred to as the ‘filter bubble’ – an analogue of the old /b/ echo chamber, created not by people in your community, but by your history and the algorithms that (poorly, for now) interpret that history. Eli Pariser writes in *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* that “[w]ith Google personalized for everyone, the query “stem cells” might present diametrically opposed results for scientists who support stem cell research and activists who oppose it. “Proof of climate change” might turn up different results for an environmental activist and an oil company executive. In polls, a huge majority of us believe that search engines are unbiased. But that may be just because they’re increasingly biased to share our own views. More and more, your computer monitor is a kind of one-way mirror, reflecting your own interests while algorithmic observers watch what you click.”²³⁹

This filtering is certainly one way of organising the abundance of data on the internet, but much of it seems underhanded. It is likely that people will not notice that they are in a bubble, since they are never exposed to its edges – the world merely conforms to their beliefs about the world. Or at least, that is the case in nominally democratic countries. In China, for instance, the filter bubble is shaped by bureaucrats – a Google search in China of “Tiananmen Square protests” returns only pictures of happy tourists in the square, with ‘Tank Man’ nowhere to be seen.²⁴⁰

Perhaps one of the most insidious uses of the information harvested from our supposedly private browsing is that it is used to target and bombard us with ads. During the year that I have been using ad blocking software, it has prevented me from seeing over *three hundred*

²³⁹ Pariser, Eli. *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin UK, 2011. p. 3.

²⁴⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/26/google-search-results-for_n_371526.html

and forty thousand ads. A staggering amount of advertisements all aimed directly at me, or at least at what Google and Facebook think is ‘me’.

Media outlets, struggling with the demise of print as well as the deterritorializing effect of the internet, also have to find new ways to engage an increasingly disinterested and niche audience. And so news sites are becoming more and more obviously ideologically and politically aligned (for example, Fox News is neo-conservative, MSNBC is liberal, etc.), and the line between reportage and editorial becomes blurred past all distinction. (Though that might not be all bad, as it allows us to spot the biases that have always been there much quicker).

This paints, perhaps, an unnecessarily bleak picture of the state of the web. As Evgeny Morozov points out in his review of *The Filter Bubble*, “For all their sins, Google and Facebook do allow users to turn off most of their filters and return to the unpersonalized Web in a matter of seconds, something “The Filter Bubble” inexplicably doesn’t mention.”²⁴¹ Even where trackers and cookies are not optional, there are ways (some of them more legal than others) to get around them, and sites like Reddit allow you to choose your own content filters, and their upvote/downvote algorithms work surprisingly well to ensure the most relevant content makes it to the top. It is exactly that *choice* that makes the important difference. To respond to our filter bubbles ethically we must first be aware of them, and we have to take control of them to stop corporations from exploiting our lives for their own gain.

Ideology II –

The myth of Bloody Mary has travelled through the centuries into our generations. Giggling, school kids stand outside a bathroom door as their friend looks into the mirror, holding a candle. The candle is the only source of light in the bathroom. As she stares into the mirror, she whispers, “Bloody Mary... Bloody Mary... Bloody Mary...” Her breath catches in her throat. She’s not afraid, this is just strange, and why should she be afraid? She knows ghosts don’t exist. She isn’t afraid. But then she sees the strange melting of her face in the mirror.

It’s a face she recognizes, but it is not her own. It looks like her mother’s face, like her grandmother’s face, like her grandmother before her, all the way back. The room seems to be

²⁴¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/books/review/book-review-the-filter-bubble-by-eli-pariser.html?pagewanted=all>

getting darker. But she continues whispering, “Bloody Mary... Bloody Mary...” She is transfixed by the visions in the mirror – the shifting and forever inscrutable face, the brief flashes of animals, animal features. Goat’s horns. Cat’s eyes. A cockroach’s hard exterior shell. And behind her, behind the reflection, something else. She can’t exactly tell whether it’s in the real world or in the mirror world, and the distinction has become blurred anyway. But she isn’t afraid; she knows it’s just a mirror. But there it is. She sees it with her own eyes, out of the corners of her real eyes. A darkness. Or not a darkness, but a darkening – not even a presence but a process of something unknowable, something ineffable, something ancient and long-forgotten. The problem, of course, is that the long-forgotten doesn’t always forget about us. A silly thought, she knows, but one she thinks nonetheless. She can hear her friends outside the door, giggling in the way that schoolgirls giggle. One of them is saying something, but she can’t exactly make out the words, and eyes are still affixed to the mirror, to the point just beyond her eyes. She dreads going back out into the well-lit living room. She dreads trying to laugh this experience off as something merely ‘spooky’. “Are you coming out? You’ve been in there for ten minutes!” She blinks, laughs, and exits the bathroom. “That was super creepy!”

The Caputo effect, coined by psychologist Giovanni B. Caputo, is the effect of seeing distortions of one’s face, hallucinations of monstrous beings, and illusions of people when staring into a mirror while in a dimly-lit room.²⁴² According to him, “[t]he construction of our self-identity includes, among other processes, the capacity to recognise oneself in the mirror, a competence acquired in childhood between 2-3 years of age. [...] Another aspect of the strange-face illusion is the potential breakdown of self-identity that may take place when gazing at a strange new face that has replaced one's own in the mirror for a relatively long time.”²⁴³

We must look into our own dim mirrors, to see ourselves as strangers, to see ourselves as monsters, and as ancestors. We must confront the darkness behind the mirror, the part of ourselves that we do not always see, and that we might not think even exists. Our privilege blinds us to our privilege, and we must be alienated from ourselves in order to see.

²⁴² Caputo, Giovanni B. "Strange-face-in-the-mirror illusion." *Perception* 39.7 (2010): 1007. (Available: <http://www.perceptionweb.com/perception/editorials/p6466.pdf>)

²⁴³ *ibid.* p. 1008.

(I tried to experience the Caputo effect for myself once. All I saw was a vast field of complete blackness swallowing everything – infinite and flat.)

Monuments for Marikana –

Extracts from the Underground is an opera and art installation by South African composer Phillip Miller. I attended the opening event at the Wits Arts Museum²⁴⁴. The work deals with mining in South Africa, and culminates in an exploration of the Marikana tragedy. Thirty four shovels hang from the ceiling, one shovel for each miner killed by the police. We mill around. It is difficult to see the art through the press of bodies. It is difficult to hear the music and words of the projection installation over the chatter and the clinking of wine glasses. The wine is good, the snacks are free. The artist gives a speech, but I can't hear him from where I'm standing – behind a couple discussing the difficulties of finding reasonable accommodation in the trendier parts of Joburg. After the introduction there is a small performance on a marimba made of pick axes specially grinded down to produce specific notes, but I can't see the instrument past the crowd of the important and influential, all engaged in low-key conversations that sometimes erupt into polite laughter. I think I see Ivan Vladislavić and I want to speak to him, tell him what a fan I am of his work and how much I enjoyed *Portrait with Keys*, but I'm too nervous and anyways I am not sure it really is him.

I wonder whether the gallery is really the best place to put art, whether this work might not have fared better in a Department of Home Affairs queue, or in a bank, or in a take-away shop in a strip mall. The gallery seems too social, and at the same time not nearly social enough.

We walk through a beautifully curated 'history of mining in art' installation, featuring some of the most influential art ever created in South Africa. Occasionally we have to push through people who have gotten stuck in conversations in the hall. Eventually we enter into the space for the main performance – a preview of the work-in-progress opera. For the first time tonight the idle chatter ceases and there is something resembling silence in the gallery. The singing begins and we are transported. Beautiful, tragic sounds fill the gallery and the passion of the performers enters into us. No one is too hip to care anymore. We listen.

²⁴⁴ <http://www.philipmiller.info/extracts-from-the-underground/>

A Modest Proposal V –

People who say other people are what's wrong with this country are what's wrong with this country.

With Apologies to Eliot –

This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang or with a whimper / But with a sigh of relief.

Conclusion

This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

- Fool, *King Lear*, III:iv:80

What you got ain't nothin' new. This country is hard on people. You can't stop what's coming. It ain't all waiting on you. That's vanity.

- *No Country for Old Men*

In 1845 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote that “[f]or each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled – merely in order to carry through its aim – to present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in its ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational, universally valid ones.”²⁴⁵ The rulers that control the great majority of our cultural values today are the executives and corporations, the celebrities and monopolies. And where else can their ideology be expressed but in culture – in *Jersey Shore*, in *The Bachelor* and its surprisingly even-more-sexist spin-off *The Bachelorette*. Our idea of society, and thus our idea of ourselves, is shaped by the aspirational tragedy of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, by the never-ending consumer utopia of pop music, the nauseating nostalgia of *Pretville*, and by the 24/7/365 carousel of bright lights and loud noises of the internet and our global social media presences.

While imprisoned by the Italian Fascist government, Antonio Gramsci imagined “[a] study of how the ideological structure of a dominant class is actually organized: namely the material organization aimed at maintaining, defending and developing the theoretical or ideological “front” [...] The press is the most dynamic part of this ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it.”²⁴⁶ The ‘press’, defined as news media, might not be the most powerful anymore (though it still has plenty of power) – the real centre of ideological power is in the culture industry, which has perhaps subsumed most of the press anyway. Our computers, phones, televisions – that is where ideological power structures and disciplines manifest themselves today, where the ruling class exercises what Gramsci acerbically calls

²⁴⁵ Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. ‘The Ruling Class and the Ruling Ideas’. p. 10.

²⁴⁶ Gramsci, Antonio. ‘Cultural Themes: Ideological Material’. p. 16.

“intellectual and moral leadership.”²⁴⁷ Gramsci, of course, would never complete the project he envisioned, but it serves as an invitation for other thinkers, and for myself. It would probably be impossible for one critic to achieve this momentous task, and besides it is a challenge not meant to be completed but rather expanded – a process that is its own end. It is in the realm of ideology and culture that I have focussed my critique, and I have come to much the same conclusion that Adorno and Horkheimer came to in 1944 when they considered the industry of their time: “culture today is infecting everything with sameness,”²⁴⁸ and that the ‘sameness’ is that of the market, where “[t]hose in charge no longer take much trouble to conceal the structure, the power of which increases the more bluntly its existence is admitted. Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors’ incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products.”²⁴⁹ What is different is the *appearance* of diversity that our age of advanced global capitalism has created. Every taste, ‘lifestyle’, and subcultural identity is catered to – as we saw in the earlier discussions about the commercialization and reification of hipster culture, punk culture, and perhaps soon black metal culture. The technological bureaucracy of the marketing industry can almost-accurately pinpoint advertisements for any individual, using our interests and views to sell us more *stuff*. With the ever-growing population of internet users, marketing will become more and more invasive in the coming years. The apparent freedom of choice we enjoy in our enlightened times is nothing more than an illusion – the ‘freedom’ of the market, the ‘freedom’ to choose to buy. The much-touted diversity of the cultural market-place is a diversity of cosmetic differences, a range of new and improved flavours of bullshit.

This ideological industry has such a grasp on us that, while we cannot bear for things to remain the same, we cannot imagine them changing – only our fantasies of complete destruction, of Armageddon, allow us to envision an alternative world, and even then private and public human relationships are barely changed. So, we keep ourselves distracted, doing anything it takes not to admit what we are doing to ourselves. And who can blame us? Even the very *concept* of hope has become a marketing tool for political puppetry. That is the

²⁴⁷ Gramsci, Antonio. ‘History of the Subaltern Classes’. p. 13.

²⁴⁸ Adorno, Theodor W. & Horkheimer, Max, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’. p. 41.

²⁴⁹ *ibid.* p. 42.

entire point of the ideological apparatus – “societies, like species, need to reproduce to survive, and culture cultivates attitudes and behaviour that predispose people to consent to established ways of thought and conduct, thus integrating individuals into a specific socio-economic system,”²⁵⁰ and we are so thoroughly integrated into the global system that we regularly volunteer our private lives to corporations without even reading the Terms & Conditions first. It turns out that we are willing to disclose just about everything about who we are, what we’re doing, and where we are if we think some strangers might approve of it – we don’t need to be stamped or microchipped or interned or whatever other conspiracy theories are out there. The truly totally administered society that Adorno and the other Critical Theorists wrote about is not one with an army of bowler-hatted bureaucrats, but one in which we happily administer ourselves. It will become increasingly normal for the boundary between private and public to blur beyond division, and then there will truly be no refuge for the homeless.

The culture industry produces with terrifying efficiency what Roland Barthes calls mythologies, and these “mythologies “disappear” history, transforming contingent factors into natural essences, as if it were natural that an African soldier salute the French flag,”²⁵¹ or to return to Rammstein’s ‘Amerika’, as if it were natural that a Buddhist monk eat Burger King. The culture industry, especially through marketing, shows us what we really need – love, companionship, community, creative expression, friendship, and then tells us that to achieve all this we just need to buy their latest processed meat product. They have latched onto our true human needs like parasites, sucking the meaning out of all we hold dear. This idea of personal liberation, the freedom to consume, has become our ruling mythology, and we begin to see the world as a mere extension of the marketplace. Everything once intricate and difficult and beautiful becomes bland, tested by market researchers for the greatest audience appeal. And as the market treats us like machines programmed to seek only personal satisfaction at the lowest possible cost, we begin to act like it – we *believe* in ‘freedom’, but only in a very specific kind of freedom, that leaves us as trapped as ever. As Raoul Vaneigen sees it, “[t]here are ways of abolishing the death penalty that can make one miss it. Up till now the particular uses that had been made of technology – or more generally the socio-economic context in which human activity is confined – while qualitatively

²⁵⁰ Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Kellner, Douglas M. eds. ‘Introduction.’ *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. p. ix.

²⁵¹ *ibid.* ‘Introduction to Part II’, p. 91.

reducing the number of occasions of pain and death, have allowed death itself to eat like a cancer into the heart of each person's life."²⁵² This death creeps in through our TV screens, our magazines, our new and improved washing powders, our Facebook feeds: in every minute part that constitutes the whole of our social reality we are taught the values of buying and selling by the aspirational myths of 'success' and 'freedom'.

The most obvious, and certainly most powerful, culture industry is that of America, but it is not truly an American culture. Rather, it is a global culture – the culture of capital and consumption – and it is this culture that creates our contemporary myths. These mythologies, mediated, created, controlled and disseminated by the culture industry, come together in what Guy Debord terms the 'spectacle', and "[f]or Debord, the spectacle is a tool for pacification and depoliticization; it is a "permanent opium war" which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life – recovering the full range of their human powers through creative practice."²⁵³ Our leisure time is toxic, allowing us a few moments to catch our breaths, via consumption, before we re-enter the hellish flames of the competitive labour market – there is no time to pursue thought, passion, improvement, art. We fill our homes with conveniences to make the limited time we get to spend there as distracting as possible and do not realize that this means we are less free at home than at work. Debord writes that "[t]he spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world. [...] alienated consumption becomes for the masses a duty supplementary to alienated production,"²⁵⁴ meaning that our very society is structured around the assumption, and thus the injunction, to consume to excess – it becomes our duty to spend if we want the economy to work (as the advice went after the 2008 crash). If anything has changed in the intervening time, it might be that production has become supplementary to consumption – at least, for the middle classes. In a time of increasing division of labour, the most important economic role an individual has is as consumer.

²⁵² Vaneigem, Raoul. 'Basic Banalities (Part I)' Knabb, Ken, ed. *Situationist international anthology*. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006. p. 148.

²⁵³ Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Kellner, Douglas M. eds. 'Introduction to Part II.' *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. p. 93.

²⁵⁴ Debord, Guy. 'Commodity as Spectacle'. p. 121.

“For Nietzsche,” Terry Eagleton writes, “if we were mindful of the appalling butchery which produced civilised humanity, we would never get out of bed”²⁵⁵. Nietzsche knew that ‘moral’ concepts, ideologies, mythologies, and “their beginnings, like the beginnings of all great things in this world, are drenched with blood, through and through. And should we not add that these moral concepts have never been fully purged of the scent of blood and torture?”²⁵⁶ A good illustration, surprisingly or not, can be found in a Nando’s ad²⁵⁷ – ‘The Dubious History of Delicious Peri-Peri’. We open on Rosettenville in the 80s, and a con man seduces an old hag to steal her peri-peri tree. “Okay,” says the narrator, “maybe what happened to Maria Costa was bad. But it wasn’t as bad as what she did 46 years earlier,” and we see a younger Maria stealing the peri-peri tree from a shipwrecked colonialist. And so the ad travels back through the history of the peri-peri tree which, as with many things, is a history of theft, all the way back to Adam and Eve stealing the very first peri-peri tree out of God’s garden. Perhaps Jean Baudrillard was right when he wrote that “[w]e are no longer in a culture of Good and Evil, but in the culture of the Better, whose mirror-equivalent is the Worse. So everything is getting simultaneously better and better, and worse and worse.”²⁵⁸ So, in the end, we might say that things are no better, and no worse, but equally terrible – albeit terrible in slightly different ways, a continuous horror show that we are told we are powerless to change. And perhaps we *are* powerless, hopeless. Historian Dan Carlin says of the assassin of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand that sparked World War I, which caused the Great Depression, which caused World War II: “[t]o be fair to Princip, if you could have gone to him and shown him the ramifications of what that *one day* would do to the world, I think he would have been horrified. He wasn’t *trying* to unleash a global world war. He just became the latest example of someone pulling the trigger in a giant historical game of Russian Roulette.”²⁵⁹ We are all players in this game, and the odds are not in our favour.

In films, like *American Sniper*, we see wars and most other conflicts as very simple battles between good and evil (or at its most complex as two opposed selfish desires that happen to get in each other’s way). This mythological framework smooths over complexity, the historical and socio-economic factors that are so bewilderingly intricate they seem almost arbitrary, and so simplifies how we look at the world. The news media has for the most part

²⁵⁵Eagleton, Terry. *How to read a poem*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011. p. 68.

²⁵⁶Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the genealogy of morals and ecce homo*. Vintage, 2010. p. 51.

²⁵⁷ Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19qsryILp6E>

²⁵⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. *Cool Memories IV, 1995–2000*. Translated by Chris Turner. Verso, 2003. p. 47.

²⁵⁹ *Blueprint to Armageddon Part I*. (podcast)

adopted this easy view, each news corporation increasingly directing itself at a political or social niche audience – and who can blame them, it sells the papers (or attracts the clicks). We are untethered from history, and now in the face of crises, local and international, we can only see suffering and not what conditions led to the crisis in the first place. We are overwhelmed and ultimately must become either heartless or switch off the TV. Adam Curtis comments on the populist Fascist revival in Europe: “The fragments of the past that have re-emerged in Europe are frightening because they are linked to a time many thought had long been buried and forgotten. But history will not repeat itself. These forgotten pieces will be reassembled to tell a new story, they will be used to justify the new political ideas of the future.”²⁶⁰ But the media is standing by to help allay our fears – they package the story in easy to digest dichotomies, usually with America and the Forces of Freedom on the side of virtue and The English and the Forces of Oppression / The Nazis and the Forces of Fascism / The Russians and the Forces of Communism / The Muslims and the Forces of Terrorism on the side of evil. This narrative hides the complexity of America’s relationship with much of the world, as well as its *complicity* in many of its problems. For evidence, one need only watch the Republican primaries. (Though America is the most powerful example, this is no less true of other countries.)

The media’s flashy graphics, the dramatic music, the Ken and Barbie doll anchors, the fast flying graphs and stats, the absolutely unnecessary amount of irrational shouting-heads: these are all tools to stop us asking, ‘Yes, but *why* are these people dying on my 100” UHD Ultra-Plasma Imageblaster TV (now with adjustable headrests and built-in urinal)TM?’ Here we reach the second problem created by our simplified mythologies (and thus our simplified understanding of the world around us): more than stopping us from blaming America, they stop us from blaming ourselves. We must never be allowed to realize that we too are complicit in the system that creates all this chaos and bloodshed. Barthes writes, “[t]o rebel against the inhumanity of the Established Order and its values, according to this way of thinking, is an illness which is common, natural, forgivable; one must not collide with it head-on, but rather exorcise it like a possession.”²⁶¹ We are instead held accountable, oxymoronically, only in the most general and most individual ways: we are told that we too are at fault by creating waste, consuming resources, not recycling, leaving the tap running for too long, and so on. But then they patronizingly tell us that we can save the planet – and feel

²⁶⁰ *The Living Dead*, Episode 1: On the Desperate Edge of Now. (documentary)

²⁶¹ Barthes, Roland. ‘Operation Margarine’. p. 100.

much better about ourselves – if we just buy an eco-friendly²⁶² SUV, or a green²⁶³ washing machine. As Barthes wrote of this kind of cognitive dissonance: “A little confessed evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil.”²⁶⁴

Here it is important to remember that it is exactly the myths of the culture industry that justify and legitimize our everyday experience of ourselves and each other – as Marx and Engels noted: “In considering such transformations [revolutions] a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.”²⁶⁵ In other words, to change the Base, the Superstructure must also be changed – the realm of ideology, of art, of *culture*. We will never change the world until we change ourselves – our beliefs, values, our very desires need to be shifted if we want to eradicate the exploitation and inequality that our civilization is built on. A large cultural shift is especially needed in South Africa – where we are at a point of losing all that the ANC fought for (like the promises made in the Freedom Charter), we have all but given up the fight against free market capitalism, and the old hostilities and prejudices still seethe under the surface of the everyday. Tertiary education and the arts are chronically underfunded, here and elsewhere in the third world, so it should come as no surprise that the majority of people are overwhelmed and helpless. The question that remains, of course, is whether or not we actually *want* to change. For those in power the answer is a simple ‘no’. For the rest of us, it seems like the answer should be a simple ‘yes’, but we are too scared, too cowed, or too alienated to care. Raoul Vaneigem interpreted the social function of alienation as “a *condition of survival*. The labour of the nonowners is subject to the same contradictions as the right of private appropriation. It transforms them into possessed beings, into producers of their own expropriation and exclusion, but it represents the only chance of survival for slaves, for serfs, for workers – so much so that the activity that allows their existence to continue by emptying it of all content ends up, through a natural and sinister reversal of perspective, by taking on a

²⁶² ‘Eco-friendly’ being one of the most milquetoast, saccharine marketing buzzwords ever to be vomited into public conscience.

²⁶³ *ibid.*

²⁶⁴ Barthes, Roland. ‘Operation Margarine’. p. 101.

²⁶⁵ ‘Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.’ Marx, Karl. “A critique of political economy.” *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Hackett, 1997.

positive appearance.”²⁶⁶ In other words, people are not alienated because we are stupid or sheeplike – at least not exclusively – but because *in order to survive* in our civilization we must give up some of our humanity or be driven mad. The poison that is killing us also anaesthetizes us. “We no more believe in star signs or what the media tells us than primitives believed in their magic or the Greeks in their gods. Only the professionals of belief believe these things. The only superstition is that of scholars and experts,” writes Baudrillard.²⁶⁷

Adorno wrote that “Art is social not only social because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated,” the tangible products of the culture industry are made by labourers in much the same way as other industries, “nor is it social simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material.” There is more to social art than just its production and its setting: “Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful,” it criticizes society by merely existing.”²⁶⁸ If I am interpreting this passage correctly, Adorno is saying here that truly social art is precisely the art that critiques, or at least *doubts* the society from which it originates. The way *South Park* doubts cash for gold schemes (and the way they have doubted just about everything in contemporary society in their eighteen season run). The way the *Infomercials* doubt suburban bliss, nostalgia, the American dream, and marketing. The way *Welcome to Night Vale*, in form, doubts the news media and, in content, doubts the banality of the everyday. Here we have to consider that to doubt one must be able to imagine an alternative to existing ways of being but without the prescription of a new way. These works give us the inspiration, or the courage, or the will, or even the *ability* to doubt the world around us and perhaps even change it. Doubt might be the strongest artistic and critical weapon we have. After all, “[a]rt’s asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society.”²⁶⁹ Artists and critics have a heavy burden – they must make us doubt and hope at the same time. Just as culture creates us, we create culture, over and over, the fractal reflections and recursions of a person between mirrors. If we ever want to break the feedback loop of cultural hegemony we have to explore other options – and thousands of artists are exploring right now, and many more have come

²⁶⁶ Vaneigem, Raoul. ‘Basic Banalities (Part I)’ Knabb, Ken, ed. *Situationist international anthology*. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006. p. 150.

²⁶⁷ Baudrillard, Jean. *Cool Memories IV, 1995–2000*. Translated by Chris Turner. Verso, 2003. p. 58.

²⁶⁸ Adorno, Theodor W. *Aesthetic Theory*. Athlone Press, 1997. pp. 225-226.

²⁶⁹ *ibid.* p.226.

before them through history. The task of the artist is akin to that of the Shakespearean Fool. According to Jan Kott,

[t]he fool does not follow any ideology. He rejects all appearances, of law, justice, moral order. He sees brute force, cruelty and lust. He has no illusions and does not seek consolation, in the existence of natural or supernatural order which provides for the punishment of evil and the reward of good. Lear, insisting on his fictitious majesty, seems ridiculous to him. All the more ridiculous because he does not see how ridiculous he is. But the Fool does not desert his ridiculous, degrading king, and accompanies him on his way to madness. The Fool knows that the only true madness is to recognize this world as rational.

Nietzsche advised that “[t]here is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective “knowing”; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more complete our concept of this thing, our “objectivity,” will be.”²⁷⁰ Aphorisms allow a single writer to explore different aspects of various objects. Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself. Many times over. My experience contradicts itself. My thoughts are contradicting. The world as we live in it is its own irreconcilable contradiction. The complexities (historical, social, political, cultural, economic) in *every single thing* are too numerous to ever reach a satisfactory conclusion – but perhaps conclusions aren’t really the point. The contradictions in my thoughts are evidence that they are not static, that they grow and change, and that they will hopefully continue growing and changing. That is not a weakness, it is a strength. In other words, it’s all about *process*. Adorno defends essayistic style by writing that it

does not let its domain be prescribed for it. Instead of accomplishing something scientifically or creating something artistically, its efforts reflect the leisure of a childlike person who has no qualms about taking his inspiration from what others have done before him. The essay reflects what is loved and hated instead of presenting the mind as creation *ex nihilo* on the model of an unrestrained work ethic. Luck

²⁷⁰ in Durham, Meenakshi Gigi, and Kellner, Douglas M. eds. *Media and cultural studies: Keywords*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009. p. x.

and play are essential to it. It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say.²⁷¹

So the essay presents the work of thought, its vacillations and turns, rather than just a finished knowledge product – it is thought for its own sake, and there is an honesty in that. In this way the aphorism is at least part autobiography – a point I’ve also made more directly throughout *Nihil Moralia* by incorporating anecdotes from my life. I am not deluded enough to think that these stories have any quantifiable ‘scientific’ value – but they acknowledge my place in the world, as a part of society with my own histories, contexts and biases. Adorno wrote that “the truthfulness of experience is the first law of artistic construction. This truthfulness however is twofold – just as art is twofold in its development, its form, and its effect. *Its components are the world and the self – expressed through typical and individual experience.*”²⁷² It is this strange line, between the self and the world, between the typical and the individual, between rules and exceptions, which I have attempted to straddle.

We must return at last to the question of an African agency in the cultural landscape. As we have seen, there are only a few rare artists who achieve success outside of their countries. But that is not the problem. The problem here is our definition of success, one that still largely clings to album sales/box office returns/elitist award ceremonies. Award ceremonies, especially, are a space in which the mainstream likes to congratulate itself for being inclusive and progressive. (Fun fact: the applause at the Oscars is in fact the sound of hundreds of rich people patting themselves on the back). That will be African artists’ biggest challenge as the internet makes distribution a non-factor: to turn their backs on Western modes of mainstream success, and to remain critical of the structures that, having once excluded them, will be desperate to parade them on stage as symbols of ‘how far they’ve come’. I don’t know what a truly African measure of success would be, but I know it can’t be measured in gold statues.

It is not only artists that must take up this charge, but audiences, readers, critics and thinkers must do so too. By trying to work from a position that is both inside and outside of the global hegemony, by focussing on the off-beat and off-centre, and by experimenting rather freely

²⁷¹ Adorno, Theodor W. "The essay as form." *New German Critique* (1984): 151-171. p. 155.

²⁷² Adorno, Theodor W. *Notes to literature*. Vol. 2. Columbia University Press, 1992. p. 257. (my emphasis)

with form, I hope to have illustrated the possibilities of critique that takes the path less travelled.

Judith Butler wrote recently on the question of the ‘usefulness’ of critique: “At stake in all of these reflections, however, is the question of whether we can continue to think about critique as something other than the practice of destruction, of nay-saying, of nihilism, or of unbridled scepticism.” A bleak view to say the least. But she continues: “Could it not be that critique is that revolution at the level of procedure without which we cannot secure rights of dissent and processes of legitimation?”²⁷³

I wrote in the introduction that we must change the world. The question that remains is whether or not that kind of change is possible. The culture industry is changing slowly; with new methods of production and new methods of distribution the old studio giants, the cable companies, and the record labels would be foolish not to be at least a little nervous. But new technologies are meaningless if they fall exclusively into the hands of the old order. Most importantly the *type* of culture we produce has to change. Our artists and thinkers must be the ones to make sure that we do not fall into the same old traps – a new Renaissance for the culture-industrial revolution.

In the end, I think there is hope. Oh yes, an infinite amount of hope. But not for us – at least not for us as we are now.

²⁷³ Butler, Judith. "Critique, dissent, disciplinarity." *Critical Inquiry* 35.4 (2009): 773-795. p. 759.

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