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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

FILOZOFSKI VESTNIK, 37(2)

ISSN

0353-4510

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Publication Date

2016

Peer reviewed

2

2016

Filozofski vestnik



Filozofski vestnik

REASON + ENJOYMENT

Edited by
Kate Montague, Sigi Jöttkandt

ISSN 0353 4510
Letnik/Volume XXXVII
Številka/Number 2
Ljubljana 2016

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Refashioning *Jouissance* for the Age of the Imaginary

Almost a century ago (1919) famed American anthropologist A. L. Kroeber undertook a study of women's fashion using magazines from 1844 to the time of his writing. He was excited to learn, via objective measurements of skirt length and width, waist size, distance from model's mouth to hemline, et al., that fashions *always change*. He concluded that the fact of change proved our civilization was an actually existing "higher order" (a supra-individual realm he called the "Superorganic") – and that it was *alive*.¹



Fig. 1: Edwardian to 1960s dress styles

Why does the opposite now hold sway? The clear patterns of fashion change that characterized the century Kroeber documented as well as the following one (the Edwardian to the Reagan eras) seem to have ground slowly to a halt. The decades since the 1990s show very few identifiable differences of the sort that distinguished the long slender dresses with diminutive waistlines and hobble skirts of the 1910s from the 1920s' short hemlines, flat chests and absent or

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¹ A. L. Kroeber, "On the Principle of Order in Civilization as Exemplified by Changes in Fashion," *The American Anthropologist* New Series, 21, (3/Jul.-Sept. 1919), p. 260.

Changes let us see "what lies beyond ourselves as individuals": that "a succession of human beings have contributed to the same end":

That which touches and permeates our lives at all moments, which is the material on which our energies is released, which could not be if we did not exist, but which yet endures before and after, and grows and changes into forms that are not of its own making but of its own definite unfolding.

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lowered waistlines, and in turn distinguished these from the shoulder-padded women in suits of the 1930s, and then from the slim elegance of 1940s' dress that gave way to the rocket shaped bustlines of the 1950s, the swinging colorful patterns of the 1960s, etc.



Fig. 2: 1950s Bustlines

Arguably the result of globalization and international clothing chains, there are far fewer marked *departures* in clothing styles since the 1990s than those accompanying the mass industrialization of the previous decades. Hairstyles show more variation than clothing styles: since the 1990s, often it is only men's facial hair that provides clues to pinpointing the era of a photograph.²

The real uniformity in dress style these days, and on a global scale demands that we ask, "What does this indicate about the nature of society today?" As young students in Europe in the 1960s, my friends and I could usually identify

² Dan MacCannell, [Private communication] writes:

[T]he absence of distinctive styles is really [due to] the knowledge of postmodernism and Warhol's "pop will eat itself" for both designers and reviewers and (to an extent) consumers also. So since as early as 1992 [...] we have been seeing 1970s retro; then five years or so after that, they added in 1980s retro. These two things formed a big share of the market through the '90s to a point that I would be hard pressed to remember or identify any distinctively '90s look, other than by the way(s) it got the '70s and '80s wrong. By the mid-aughties, both '70s and '80s retro were still vaguely discernible but Monkees-esque late-'60s mod looks, which had risen and fallen as retro within the period 1986-'89, were back also. As of 2005, however, '80s retro was the strongest, at least in Britain and Scandinavia. [...] In short, fashion "innovation" now genuinely does seem to consist of deciding WHEN to reintroduce WHICH old look from WHICH decade 1920s-1980s.

The Spring 2016 Paris show was described in the news as drawing from the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s.

the country of origin of those visiting, say, the Louvre. That would be impossible now. The *Gap* style of casual dress (virtually unchanged since its introduction in the late 1960s) predominates among both locals and tourists in my home city of San Francisco: no matter where they hail from, even in the city center people wear exclusively casual-to-sloppy clothing, or dress down even further in trekker styles, sporting gear purchased from the *Gap*'s subsidiary *Banana Republic* or from more serious outfitters for hikers and campers. Standardization of style is found on every street of every city in the world: the upper image is a snapshot of tourists on Lombard Street in San Francisco; below, a Tommy Hilfiger advertisement –both absent gender differentiated clothing.

Fig. 3: Tourists in San Francisco (photo: Dean MacCannell) and Tommy Hilfiger advertisement 2015



Art historian Dan MacCannell suggests one possible economic motivation for this phenomenon:

The multi-generational unemployed, for their part, now wear “sportswear” that ALSO changed little from the mid 1970s onward, i.e., sweatsuits with brand logos, mostly so that whether used or new there is minimal stylistic differentiation.

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(Homeless people used to forage for jogging suits so they could blend in more easily on our streets.)

Indeed, the *New York Times*'s generally astute film critic A. O. Scott was recently puzzled by Noah Baumbach's 2014 film *While We're Young*, which features a financially successful older couple who befriends and gradually starts to imitate a less well off younger couple who cheerfully make do with old thrift shop items and out-of-style clothing. The older man finds himself unexpectedly sporting “a

narrow-brimmed fedora” – popular in the 60s, the fedora went out of fashion by the 70s, was brought back as “retro” in the 80s, went out of fashion again, but is now a favorite for thrift store shoppers.³



Fig. 4: Adam Driver and Ben Stiller wearing matching fedoras in *While We're Young*

Financial considerations are not, however, the only factor in the homogenization of our dress. I recently saw the Saudi Arabian film *Wadjda*, which features a young girl from a middle class family who, whenever she is in the street or at school, conforms to the covered dress (the hijab and later the abayah) demand-



Fig. 5: A: Wajda in street dress B: Wajda at home (stills from the 2012 film *Wadjda*)

³ A. O. Scott, “A Wry Coupling of Gen X and Y,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2015, p. C1.

ed by her religion. But at home she wears a Tee-shirt with a cheeky logo, jeans and sneakers – our new universal uniform.

While the hijab, niqab and burka remain the most identifiably “different,” non-universal and culture-bound traditional styles of dress for women world-wide these days, they are also fodder for High Fashion:

Fig. 6: Fashion maven Isabella Blow's own “burka” (still from 2015 film *The Year in Fashion*)



As Europe and America begin imposing new bans on traditional Muslim women’s clothing (for reasons of “national security” or “preserving democratic secularism”) their style is just fresh material for High Fashion, marking its refusal to follow social dictates and norms. Of course, designers have always looked for inspiration anywhere and everywhere – in nature, in other arts like mural art (Prada), hip hop (Rick Owens) or even Lacanian “theory” (the letters of the body in Marc Jacobs’ final collection for Vuitton):



Fig. 7: Marc Jacob, final collection 2014
(still from 2015 film *The Year in Fashion*)

Bergdorf Goodman window displays even featured mannequins wearing high-priced “bag lady” outfits in the early 1980s as homelessness first hit the news. But once everyone’s street wear came to resemble the homeless, this trend quickly faded. There is diversity here, but not difference of the kind that marks an era as distinctive and there is no change over time.

As High Fashion distances itself from the everyday, however, fashion writers strain to make it responsible for the “big picture” – for evaluating the state of society today. Designers are charged with providing insight into the condition of our economy and our culture: Vanessa Freidman complains, for example, that Veronica Etre’s collection “did not attempt to address any larger questions of contemporary culture and as a result lacked a certain currency”.⁴

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Still, something fundamental has shifted in the *position* of High Fashion: it has lost its pre-eminence as supreme arbiter of dress; its exclusive power to create trends has largely vanished. Where once its original creations were avidly copied in less costly versions for wider consumption, High Fashion now operates on

⁴ Vanessa Freidman, *The New York Times*, March 28, 2015, p. A 18.

Fig. 8: Hip hop inspired design by Rick Owens 2014 (still from 2015 film *The Year in Fashion*)



a rarefied plane, and ordinary people are no longer guided in what to wear by *imitating* High Fashion. Instead people *mirror what everyone else around them wears*.⁵ The Internet column “On the Street” by the *New York Times*’ Bill Cunningham is written after he roams city streets to report on what people are wearing *right now*. His sightings of the “new” are confined to small details; for example, as spring arrives Cunningham notes, “On the fashion front, legs emerged

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⁵ I called this *egomimesis* (MacCannell 1991). Mirroring “heals” the narcissistic wound inflicted on you by the “superior” mirror image.

and New Yorkers added a surprising color to their signature black-white-gray looks: chrome silver.”⁶

Big surprise! (Though hardly the same kind of surprise of the shocking pinks, psychedelic colorations and swooping patterns of the 1960s). Now we have a puritanical uniformity of color and pattern (black-white-gray), with certain small items like men’s socks, hats and sneakers exempted from this austerity: “Young men are pushing the style envelope with felt hats, winged sneakers [...] and embroidered shoulders.”⁷

If the authoritative voice of High Fashion has ceased to act the big O Other in our culture, this is perhaps appropriate for an age which claims to be at the “end of history” (Francis Fukuyama), for a society that declares “Society doesn’t exist” (Margaret Thatcher), and for an era that promises the end of want, with plenty for all: the so-called “post-scarcity condition” (Andrew Ross.) To make any case for restarting history, we would need to lay out the Reason (its universal logic) and the impasses of our current order, and begin configuring a different one (I will propose that this different or supplemental universal be the logic of the feminine, about which more later).

A quite particular Imaginary has configured our global order “at the end of history” as a stable, unchanging order intended to guarantee enjoyment for all: a world of universal satisfaction – or unlimited *jouissance*. So much, then for Kroeber’s thesis that regular departures in fashion prove that ours is a *living* civilization whose traditions are vibrant enough to birth change and innovation, like that enjoyed by the Native Americans he studied. As *art* (even high art, e.g. Erwin Blumenfeld)⁸ High Fashion once indexed a realm of *change and desire for change in our societies*, now definitively displaced by the new imperative that everyone *be and have the same*.

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⁶ Bill Cunningham, “Spring Unfurls,” “On the Street,” internet column, *The New York Times*, March 29, 2015.

⁷ Cunningham, “Fashion-Forward Lads,” “On the Street,” internet column, *The New York Times*, January 25, 2015.

⁸ See *The Man Who Shot Beautiful Women*, a biographical film about Erwin Blumenfeld, a Jewish-German artist turned art photographer who fled Hitler. In New York, Blumenfeld invented original scenarios and conventions for fashion shoots, distinguished by high artistry. Directed by Nick Watson; BBC 4 2013.



Fig. 9: Indistinguishable gender in these designs by Alexander Wang (magazine advertisement 2015)

The Imaginary Social Order: As Foretold By Freud

What is really going to happen at the end of history? It will be a question of and for *jouissance* (and the logic or *Reason* supporting it): the paradox of our culture’s impossible conjunction of images of fabulous accumulations of wealth with the stipulation of equal enjoyment for all. The deep logic of a social order that claims to put “*jouissance*” wordlessly and immediately at all our fingertips but in reality reserves it to the few is disturbing at best. Should we not attempt to imagine refashioning *jouissance* beyond the “end of history” to resolve this contradiction?

My first interrogation of the current universal is: *what* precisely is enjoyed in the post-historical order? To answer, I turn to Freud’s *Group Psychology* (*SE XVIII*, 1922); and then to Lacan’s late research on the social discourses in *Seminar XVII* (especially the discourse of capitalism), for which he makes extensive use of the *Group Psychology*; as well as his study of the *Imaginary* in *Seminar XXIII*.

Let’s begin by recalling the new type of social group Freud analyzed (which he labeled “artificial”) that was characterized by an *imaginary equality*. Its psychological underpinnings are highly relevant to the matter of *jouissance* today. Freud’s 1922 *Group Psychology* uncovered the relation of *ego* to *group life* in modern society. He investigated this social group on the model of associations whose members are unrelated by blood, like the Army or the Church, and which was fast becoming the pattern for whole societies. Freud called them “artificial” but I prefer to call them “imaginary” for reasons I presently make clear. He established that a cardinal feature of the synthetic group is its founding imperative: to

*conformity and uniformity in looks and dress.*⁹ “Everyone,” he notes, “must have the same and be the same” (*Ibid.* 120-21). Moreover, even *gender distinctions* are undesirable.¹⁰ The *equality* that prevails in such groups is an equality neither of wealth nor of rights; it exists purely at the level of *visual images*; which is why there should be no visibly marked gender differences.

In his delineation of group psychology, Freud thus framed a startlingly original way of rethinking the structure of contemporary society: as a set of *autonomous individuals* bound to each other by *visible images* rather than by *abstract symbols* (e.g., language, law, religion, morality, art and ethics). His thesis is that image-based *social ties* bind *discrete egos* together into a *unified whole* through *mutually reflecting self-images*, and that those party to this mirroring are and must be *just like one another*.¹¹ Inter-ego conflict is muted by its deepest *commandment to conformity and uniformity, a uniformity required for access to full equality in the group*. Because it develops as a singular totality (a whole composed of individual egos acting as visual mirrors for each other) the group can call up the resources of *self-love* to ensure the attachment of each ego to every other in (and to) the social group.

Human society thus defined as a *commerce of images* appears to have major advantages in cohesiveness over societies formed through *symbolic exchange*. In reality, however, their uniformity is a two-edged sword. The pressure to conform to the ideal identity of the group in them is not unlike the often intense pressure one feels today to declare one’s identity politics, one’s belonging to an “identity group” even though this means one must yield on the many different identifications s/he is necessarily composed of in favor of one singular trait, generally defined visually (skin color or attire e.g.).¹² Extrapolated on a larger social scale the consequences are hardly benign.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, SE XVIII, 1922, p. 93ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141; Lacan says frankly that capitalism begins by “getting rid of sex” in *Télévision*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1974, p. 51.

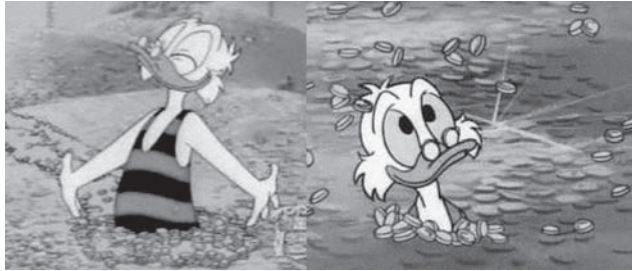
¹¹ He acknowledges Gabriel Tarde on imitation and Gustave Le Bon on “crowds,” but finds both limited in terms of the new group.

¹² Freud: “In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent [...]” – others the ego tries to deny. (Freud, 1922, p. 69).

When large, pluralistic nations attempt to take on a group psychology that excludes all people who deviate in *looks* from a single norm this is perhaps the most troubling political outcome of image-dominated identity politics. Anyone antagonistic to a particular “identity” group can mobilize the same image or trait to “prove” that its members deviate too far from a larger society’s ideal ego, its *imago*. They argue the whole society would be more homogeneous, more harmonious – without *those* people. (See the rhetoric of Donald Trump.)¹³

The chief *economic* corollary to a large social group ordered by images is an implied superiority of Western *capitalism* over other forms of economy. Capitalism is perhaps unique in its power to create the wealth of nations and individuals and, in theory; each person under its regime has an even chance of obtaining

Fig. 10: Disney’s Scrooge McDuck, swimming in his money



said wealth. And yet, acquiring wealth is not an attribute of 99% of those who live under late capitalism. Indeed, capitalism must continually seduce masses of people to espouse its economic ideology, which does not necessarily benefit them, with well-crafted images tying us libidinally to its discourse: images of a vast *wealth-available-to-all*. Recall the superabundant piles of money in Disney’s Scrooge McDuck, who is pictured swimming in his gold. Or the American television programs saturated with images of massive wealth (as depicted and classically represented in pop culture in the series, *Dallas*).¹⁴ Or the advertise-

¹³ France recently singled out the Roma for deportation and news outlets published front-page images of the gypsies’ shabby lifestyle and dark looks. Simultaneously, President Sarkozy launched a campaign to get his compatriots to define “Frenchness” by making checklists of “real” French attributes.

¹⁴ Please see my discussion in “Lacan’s Imaginary: A Practical Guide,” in S. Tomsic and A. Zevnik, *Jacques Lacan Between Psychoanalysis and Politics*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York 2016, pp. 72-85.

ments in our leading newspapers that turn ordinary items like purses, watches, or shoes into ultra luxurious, exorbitantly expensive, unattainable fetishes – “luxury goods.” Hence the inordinate attention television and the internet pay to the lifestyles of the “rich and famous,” which has now borne political fruit – wealthy Donald Trump, reality television star, has become a serious political challenger for the presidency of the nation.

The more images of extreme wealth contradict the reality of people’s economic condition, the more they become attached to the concept of wealth. Why? Lacan once asked, “What is wealth?” and his response was a tautology: “Wealth is an attribute of the wealthy.” He then asked why those without wealth support the wealthy; he answered that they *identify with the wealthy* though they are so far from being like them.¹⁵ Each person must feel convinced that the wealthy really are *just like you and me*.¹⁶ Lest we forget that the *identification* that reconciles you to your abjection by submerging it in an empire of images has a notably dark history, as in Freud’s picture of the exploited plebeian in Ancient Rome:

No doubt one is a wretched plebeian, harassed by debts and military service; but to make up for it, one is a Roman citizen, one has one’s share in the task of ruling other nations and dictating their laws.¹⁷

Identification with wealth (as with the grandeur of empire) is destructive because the Imaginary it constructs ends by stifling Imagination: we lose the ability and the freedom to dream of alternative futures, contemplate different social arrangements, or devise economies not defined exclusively by wealth accumulation.¹⁸

Symbolic To Imaginary Identification

The human subject is shaped, Lacan says, by the operation of language, the Symbolic par excellence. Language “carves a body out of animal substance,”

¹⁵ Lacan, 2007, pp. 94-5.

¹⁶ A common feature of American conservatives’ critiques of the poor is that they are insufficiently enamored of wealth, insufficiently identified with the affluence of the whole.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, SE XXI, 1927, p. 13.

¹⁸ Money as symbolic is supposed to be external or objective measure of social worth (per Emmanuel Levinas), its *value* socially authenticated. Virtual money, e.g., Bitcoins, has no specific social symbolic contract; amassing it is all that counts.

and splits the *ego* into two parts, conscious and unconscious, forming the *subject*, divided by language: *the speaking being (parlêtre)*.¹⁹ The conscious part follows the dictates of language and society, placing its passions (and aggressions) under the rule of the original *Symbolic* law: Oedipus, the “No” of the Father. The inhibiting Father will model your symbolic *identification* as an *ego-ideal*, anchored in your newly formed *unconscious*.

The subject’s *body* is also shaped by language, which “carves” away its simple animal pleasures and reshapes it as an erotic body, fashioned by fantasies of the lost *jouissance* that return to stamp themselves upon it: Lacan’s “letters of the body.” (These phantoms settle mainly in the genitals, though not exclusively so, e.g., the feminine and the perverse versus the masculine body.) Henceforward, organized by a *linguistic logic* that supersedes *organic logic*, the individual’s *body* is reordered as the fantasmatically eroticized body, *a body without organs*.²⁰ Though it has suffered the *loss* of direct satisfactions, this loss is a *gain* for culture, civilization and the *Symbolic*: after all, Freud says the amputation of animal satisfaction drives us to strive to *work* – to fill in for its loss, *sublimate* it, and imagine other ways of finding pleasure.²¹

This is how *art* is born – and *desire*: Oedipal desire; *symbolic desire* or *jouissance*, deferred. Like language, which always promises a meaning it can never finally deliver, desire promises a satisfaction that it is itself instrumental in deferring. After all, Lacan characterized the dominion of the *symbol* as developing from its power to insert *productive voids* into the *real* of one’s anatomical body.²²

For Freud, the original basis of humanity’s life in common (civilization, society) is also a void, an inescapable *lack*. *Everything held in common is nothing – except for what each subject has yielded claim to for itself*. The entirety of one’s relation to others is structured by the *recognition of mutual lack* – we can see that the other’s lack is the same as one’s own. From religion as sacrifice to love, what counts in *Symbolic* order is that each person offers the other precisely *what they*

¹⁹ Lacan 1974, p. 16; 1977, p. 92.

²⁰ Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Œdipus*, Continuum, New York and London 1977.

²¹ Freud, *SE VII*: p. 168.

²² MacCannell, “The Abyss of Mind and Matter: Sexuality on Edge,” in *Erogene Gefahrenen Zonen: Aktuelle Produktionen des (infantile) Sexuellen*, ed. Insa Härtel, Kulturverlag Kadmos, Berlin 2013, pp. 73-89.

do not have: their nothing, their desire, their want.²³ In a Symbolic Order, under Oedipus, identification is based on this recognition of a want held in common. While the individual may secretly harbor lingering resentment against sacrificing enjoyments to the collective, in the main it realizes the value of a social order that recognizes this shared lack and strives to mitigate it.

The fundamental definition of *Symbolic equality* then is not that everyone enjoys the same things, but that *no one fully enjoys*. The constitutive void at the heart of the Symbolic is precisely what grants its social order a crucial *openness to change, to creating meaning, to becoming rather than being*, and prevents the entropy inherent in total satisfaction (the entropy of death drive). Hostility to the other persists in the unconscious: a knot ties abstract symbols of mutual lack/desire to the illicit and hostile passions and hostility preserved in unconscious *fantasies of enjoying what one has sacrificed to the Symbolic social contract*. This resentment largely stays under control and with good reason: the Symbolic/Oedipal order bans certain enjoyments not only for the sake of the whole society but for the sake of its individual subjects: complete satisfaction is literally unbearable, impossible for any speaking being, the *parlêtre*.

Compare this with Freud's discovery that image-based group psychology has a different psychological foundation from the constitution of our earliest human psychology (our impulse to work in concert, to profit from a collective force against nature). The group-to-ego relation in the imaginary structure is not that of symbolic desire as a mutual lack, but the repression of a primordial *envy* among siblings in the nursery. Each child rivals the others for its parents' love and affection, and each imagines that one or another of them, especially a newborn, is getting more than their fair share. The envy gets masked when the harmony and unity of the family is imposed over it via an idealized love of all for all:

What appears later on in society in the shape of *Gemeingeist*, *esprit de corps*, "group spirit," etc., does not belie its derivation from what was originally envy. No one must want to put himself forward, everyone must be the same and have the same. Social Justice means that we deny ourselves many things so that others may have to do without them as well [...]. Thus social feeling is based upon the

²³ Freud, 1927, p. 6.

reversal of what was first a hostile feeling into a positively-toned tie in the nature of identification.²⁴

Freud illustrates, using the description of a group of girls who surround a crooner they idolize and who are all united in their “love” for him – until he happens to single one out for special attention, perhaps the one among them wearing a form-fitting red dress. Then the hair pulling begins.²⁵

Lacan placed the origin of inter-ego rivalry further back than the conflicts in the nursery, in the first glimpse the child has of its own reflection. In the pre-social “mirror stage” the infant assumes the other in the mirror *is superior to it* due to its completeness as an image – a wholeness the infant feels it itself lacks. It infers the mirror-other must have deprived it of its own full-bodied *jouissance*. Mitigation of this hostility follows upon the infant’s coming to language, where the Symbolic’s big Other inducts the child into the laws of society and justice.

In the Imaginary, by contrast with the Symbolic, complete satisfaction is not only presumed possible but no longer needs to be sacrificed for the sake of the collectivity: indeed, “*Jouissance for all*” could be its slogan. Imaginary identification fashions the solidarity of the whole society on the basis of a faith in the equal enjoyment of all, a belief that creates the condition for an equal love of all for all within the whole without distinctions.

Except for One. Freud: “Do not let us forget, however, that the demand for equality in a group applies only to its members and not to the leader. All the members must be equal to one another, but they all want to be ruled by one person” (*GP* 121). Proof for this lies in the fact that even wealthy and powerful political leaders try to look like, and posture like ordinary people. (Old wealth hid itself, because it knew it was different. Now Trump can flaunt it saying in effect, “I’m doing exactly what you would do if you were me.”) We can question whether in the largest societies if this “Leader” – this “one person” who rules – is an actual *person* any longer: does not *wealth itself* reign supreme today? Everyone loves money equally, and money always commands our social order.

²⁴ Freud, 1922, pp. 120-121.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

A postmodern society that claims the capacity for full and equal enjoyment – but not full employment – must be based on the universal identification of all with all, with no need either for *desire* (mutual want) or for *art* (with its partial, sublimated) *jouissance*. To assert the absolute *equality of enjoyment* today for everyone surely masks the deepest real inequality, and is patently ridiculous extended in the absence of a group psychology and obligatory imaginary identification. Still, this particular kind of Imaginary looms over us today and informs so much of our thinking that it is clear we must begin to take the consequences of its distinctive mode of identification very seriously.

What harm a society of the imaginary?

Ours has historically been a terrible experience of a politics of the Imaginary, with manipulations of visual images (of race and religion) used to stir conflict, war, persecutions and genocides (see Nazi propaganda films against Jews). Still many people have been and remain optimistic about the flip side of group psychology: its alleged harmony. Indeed, after World War II, thinkers and planners firmly believed that creating small *societies of likes* (called “garden cities” or “suburbs”) would generate greater cohesion – and prevent more conflicts – than traditional societies ever had.²⁶ They designed living groups for economic, ethnic and religious homogeneity, claiming that only such standardization could prevent interpersonal, economic, and religious strife.

But trying to solve social antagonism by using matched *individuals* as the basic building blocks of a social group with which each must identify is highly questionable. While group psychology provisionally quiets inter-ego antagonisms, according to Freud, it never eradicates it: groups formed through ego identification with their group are always hostile to other groups.²⁷ If we assume that any large scale social order can ever be achieved on an Imaginary basis (Nazi Germany came close) then every sub-group based on their own internal imaginary identifications will be inherently and adamantly hostile to the whole – and the

²⁶ Chief New York city planner Charles Abrams demurred from this notion when he criticized the Nineteenth International Conference for Housing and Town Planning held in 1948, Zurich, Switzerland, and attended by delegates of 30 countries: Charles Abrams, “Human Relations in City Planning,” *Third Session of the Chicago Conference on Civic Unity*, 1949, p. 38.

²⁷ Lacan demonstrated that the ego is born in an originary narcissism: in *hostility* to the other at the very moment of its inception in the mirror: See MacCannell 2016, pp. 72-3.

whole “establishment” composed of these sub-groups will find the very mechanism that holds it together will cause it to fly apart.

So what creates the unity and solidarity of the group psychology Freud discovers? The following diagram explains:

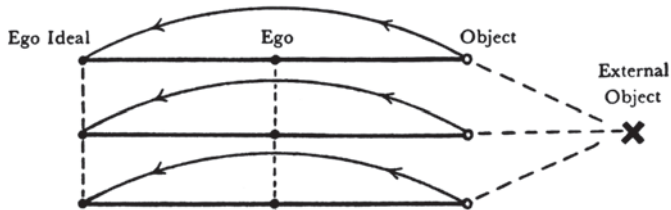


Fig. 11: Group psychology and the analysis of the Ego²⁸

For each ego tied together with each other here, its paternal *ego-ideal* (the “Symbolic Father” anchored in the unconscious) is replaced by an *ideal ego*: an external *visual object* that unites all egos in their love for it. The image-object fuses everyone’s *ideal ego* with that of all the others through *identification with the Leader’s* visual image. Through their love, all *identify* “themselves with one another in their ego.”²⁹ The focus for all is the sole exception to the rule of equal *jouissance*: the Leader. The *symbol*, neither a *having* nor a *being*, meets its dialectical antithesis in this *image-object*, which asserts we can all *have* (the object) and *be* (the object) at the same time – not *despite*, but *because* of our social commitment, our tie to the whole which in group psychology becomes just a flat mirroring of all by all.

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This is the real appeal of Imaginary society: if an *undivided individual ego* is the foundation of a *social order built by identification*, that means the Oedipally split ego is healed, made whole, with no further need to sacrifice its *jouissance* to the collective. The *ego not split by language* is not subject to symbolic commandments. The *undivided ego* is also the necessary basis of imaginary *equality*:

²⁸ Freud, 1921, *Group Psychology*, p. 116.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

“Every one must be the same and have the same.”³⁰ If the other is *you*, the very same as you – same value, same being – then no language or metaphor is needed to bridge the inalterable gap between you and me, no necessary *symbolic* passage from one to an other.

The problem with a society based on set of like individuals however, is that their egos exist as “undivided” only by virtue of their *inclusion within the whole*, a bounded totality whose oneness and singularity mirrors and sustains it. Only the One can support a multitude of ones. *Identification with the whole* is both required and assured by the fact that society itself is one whole and every individual is at one with this whole which is the sum total of *jouissance* itself. The potential for oppressive conformity means a real, radical excision of differences.

(Un)Limited *Jouissance*

Slavoj Žižek has described our era as that of the *obscene or sadistic superego*, in which an “anything goes” mentality (of “*Jouissance* for all,” as I put it) combines with intensifying self-imposed regulations against (guilty) pleasures (e.g., the various fads for “giving up” eating sugar, fat or meat and now gluten).³¹ The drawback to Žižek’s approach is that it is very insightful at the level of *individual psychology* but does not address corresponding alterations in the constitution of *society* itself – material changes in what Lacan called *discourses* or varying *forms of the social tie*.³² The fact that Oedipus, desire, and symbolic social ties no longer seem to compel us subjectively indicates less the reign of the Superego than the rise of the *Imaginary* which now has the power to determine what only the *Symbolic* once determined: the shape of *society itself*.

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All societies promise individuals a measure of satisfaction for forbidden wishes – otherwise that portion of us which is “enemy” to civilization would have long since prevailed. Lacan knew that desire, lack, unfulfilled longing – all these still rest on the primal passions originally installed (and “fulfilled” fantasmatically)

³⁰ Freud, 1921, *Group Psychology*, pp. 120-21.

³¹ Anna Freud thought the superego a benign voice of moral conscience; her rival Lacan found it pernicious, hostile “extimate” Other. Freud notes the same in *The Ego and the Id*, SE XIX, 1923, pp. 54-5.

³² He develops the theory of social ties – of the *discourses* – systematically in *Seminar XVII*, 1969-70 and in *Seminar XX* which shows his algorithms in final form.

in the unconscious. Those primal passions require some satisfaction – for as Freud once put it, these drives emerge from a hellish unconscious as shades that must be fed with blood. *Art* has been the main avenue for simulating the satisfaction of our unspeakable drives – sublimation.

Where drive satisfaction is not strongly proscribed, however, sublimation is ineffective. In the post-Symbolic what was once consigned to the unconscious rises to the surface. Recall the 1960s slogan, “Just *do* it!” Nonetheless, Imaginary society can no more dispense with sublimation than Symbolic society can: no society can exist without limits on the enjoyment of all by all.³³ But where exactly does that limit exist within the field of Imaginary plenitude?

Lacan discovered the locus of sublimated satisfaction in the Imaginary group in the *objects* that *promise complete enjoyment* (“Satisfaction guaranteed,” blockbuster action movies, video games). If simulating drive-satisfaction was once the province of great writers, talented dramatists, and outstanding artists, today we have automated the production of image-objects simulating the satisfactions of the most forbidden drives. (Some of today’s video games consist of killing and counting up the victims, with no story line on the reason for killing.) The difference from Symbolic sublimation is not of kind, but of degree: Lacan calls its avatars *jouissances en toc*, counterfeit enjoyments, mock fulfilments.³⁴

Already in 1969 Lacan predicted that such *jouissances en toc* (fake, simulated enjoyments) would shortly become embedded in the kind of little gadgets (*lathouses*) just beginning to appear in our *aléthosphère* (*world picture*).³⁵ Note, please, that Lacan predicted this well before the deluge of *i-objects* now flooding over us: iPods, iPhones, iPads, etc. He deduced them logically from the image/egocentrism that he, like Freud, found to be the basis of our imaginary society today. The true function of such *jouissance en toc* was to reassure us, through an overwhelming proliferation and accumulation of gadgets, that our drives are fully satisfiable and under the control of an ego secure in its wholeness, unity, and mastery.

³³ Lacan, 1989, p. 71.

³⁴ Lacan 2007, p. 95 ff; MacCannell, 2006.

³⁵ Lacan, *Seminar XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 1969-1970, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007 188.

At first, when he looked into our new social reality, a realm of simulated fantasies and of total *jouissance*,³⁶ shaped by the imaginary process that originally fashioned our egos, he still believed that psychoanalysis could counter its fantasies with the signifier: fantasies could never survive being spoken, he wrote.³⁷

Perhaps he should have considered the possibility that they might, however, persist by being *worn*.

Sexual Difference Encore

Lacan first turned directly to the Imaginary to question in depth our basic *models for jouissance* in his brilliant *Seminar XX*. Here he began to formulate two differing *logical* universals (as distinct from biological ones) that can be drawn from the way our bodies, fashioned by language and the ghost of lost *jouissance*, are identified as masculine and feminine in logic. The *masculine* side's logic, extrapolated universally, is that "all are castrated by the signifier": all *want*, none can access unsublimated *jouissance* – except for One. The sole exception to universal castration he termed *le père jouissant*. The logic of the *feminine* side's relation to *jouissance* is nuanced differently: it is that "everyone is castrated by the signifier" – except for *some*. Not all are submitted to the deprivation of *jouissance* but there is no single One who alone enjoys unchecked as in masculinity's universal.

That One is Freud's exceptional "person," the Leader who alone is permitted to be *unequal*: "All the members must be equal to one another, but they all want to be ruled by one person."³⁸ If everyone else is castrated, and lacking, in this context it is not a symbolic sacrifice, but an imaginary version of "social justice": "[It] means that we deny ourselves many things so that others may have to do without them as well."

³⁶ Using Freud's group psychology, focused on the "revolution" (a quarter turn) in discourse from Mastery to University (*Seminar XVII* 2007). University discourse puts S_2 (*the sum total, or treasury of knowledge*) in the dominant position, making it parallel to the dominant of accumulated wealth in the discourse of capitalism. (See MacCannell, "More Thoughts for the Time on War and Death: The Discourse of Capitalism in Lacan's *Seminar XVII*," in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J. Clemens and R. Grigg, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2006, pp. 202-3.

³⁷ Lacan, *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 1959-1960, Norton, New York 1992, p. 80.

³⁸ Freud, 1922, p. 121.

The masculine universal, like group psychology means that the One can become *the sum total of all available jouissance*.³⁹ We witness today how the 1% enjoys virtually all the money while the 99% are left with little or nothing – that 1% is clearly parallel to the “exception” Lacan points out as the privileged One. At the very least such truly massive universal inequality has to have developed from a one-sided imaginary logic, with no alternative model at play: in this case the feminine universal is strikingly absent.

What are the real consequences of doing away with sexual difference (as I have illustrated in the case of fashion) for society today? In a 1970 interview, published as *Télévision*, Lacan says directly that capitalism begins *by getting rid of sex*.⁴⁰ This is not an idle claim: it makes clear that capitalism requires a new relation to the object of satisfaction, and that the “artificial” groups that proliferate under its universal aegis are part and parcel with it. Structured as it is around the immense accumulation of commodities and the amassing of enormous surplus satisfac-

Fig. 12: Model with holographic belt that resizes the model's waist (Dutch designer Iris van Herpen NYT)



³⁹ MacCannell, 2006, pp. 202-03.

⁴⁰ Lacan, 1974, p. 51.

tions, the whole of society must embody all the profit, the excess, and the waste socially produced by us, without the interference of desires for anything else.

The fate of the body in women's fashion offers an extreme example: while clear distinctions in dress between the genders have all but disappeared in everyday life, we should note that women's bodies *as such* have largely disappeared from High Fashion as well. Traditional feminine shape is now admitted only if purely reconfigured by the Imaginary, and not by its logical (sexual) constitution by the signifier. This Iris van Herpen outfit features a holographic belt that drastically reduces the model's waistline:

Apparently, "woman's" accession to "equality" in the new order has meant the loss of *her specific body*. What does such gender equity at the Imaginary level really signify?

Public efforts to acknowledge women specifically while trying to adhere to the "equality" imperative display a telling ambivalence. During early 2015, fashion analysts wrote: "Follow the Leaders: Women in power were the backdrop as designers showed updates tailored to contemporary visions of strength and



Fig. 13: Maison Margiela, 2015 caption: Model as sad Clown; Yves Saint Laurent, 2015: [caption woman as hobo or assault victim?]

authority.”⁴¹ The following week the same fashion section featured designs in which female models show the very opposite of strength and authority. On the left: hobo or clown? On the right: victim of assault?

What better proof of the difficult acknowledgment of women and their bodies today than the many anorexic young girls now vanishing themselves by starvation? Analysts attribute the mania for becoming ever-thinner to their imitating emaciated fashion models; indeed, France is considering laws against underweight models (in 2010, model-actress Isabelle Caro died of malnutrition – she weighed just 53 pounds), and against internet sites that promote anorexia.⁴² As the lawmakers’ searched for a solution to the vogue for anorexia, French psychiatrist Marcel Rufo remained unsure that this was the heart of the problem (“he believed the public was searching for an explanation for children’s pursuit of thinness: [...]. So, one designates fashion as to blame, but I believe it is much more complicated than that.”⁴³

Are the French girls (like many in other Western societies) really copying the hollow-eyed, disheveled, skin-and-bones runway models as they seek ever-thinner bodies? Or is some *hidden imperative at play* that none is able to resist falling victim to – an imperative that the fashion models were the first to articulate?

There is something deeply ominous at work in girls’ obsessive thinning of their bodies: theirs is surely an effort to *fit in* to a world that refuses their actual bodies any cultural accommodation. In a social order whose fundamental false consciousness is that of “equality,” these young girls are seeing no room, no *place* for them in their feminine specificity; they are extrapolating from experience that neither the street nor High Fashion presents anything with a *specifically feminine* form – or even a *female body* as such.

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Some might believe that the cultural development away from marking any visible difference between male and female bodies is progress – liberating for women weary of being objectified by a male gaze. Perhaps. But the undeniable exci-

⁴¹ *The New York Times*, July 3, 2015, p. A17.

⁴² Alissa J. Rubin, “French Bill on Anorexia and Models Passes a Test,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2015, p. A4.

⁴³ Rubin, “French Debate Setting Weight Standards for Models,” *The New York Times* March 19, 2015, p. A6.

sion of the feminine body may be due less to a demand for equality than to an unconscious demand for its cultural eradication. A recent essay in the *New York Times* reported on a major survey that found three-quarters of adolescent girls today are disturbed, mortified or horrified by their development of breasts. This prompts a great many to drop out of participation in sports and gym classes: “I was taking taekwondo, and I would look in the big mirror and try to find ways to cover myself up and hide,” says Andria Castillo, a junior in high school, “I felt boys and girls were making fun of me.”⁴⁴ The researchers’ attempt to explain the cause as “discomfort with their brassieres” is really quite pathetic: school girls have participated in physical education and in sports for more than a century, without special sports bras, or similar psychological horror of their breasts.

Gender equality at the level of the image may turn out to be one of the more sinister parts of emancipation from Oedipal civilization; indeed, if it really marks the triumph of the masculine universal, as I am suggesting, its evil cannot be overstated.⁴⁵

Returning to Lacan’s model of sexuation, we find that the *other* universal is all but invisible these days, too. The widespread acquiescence to the capture of all wealth by the few, despite strong public and political protests against it, would not be possible in the feminine universal: if “Not all” are castrated, and not all of one’s own body is under the command of the signifier then there can be no One to have it all. When I detailed the structure of group psychology above, based on the ego, I said that its utopian goal was “equal enjoyment for all.” Recall that the psyche’s original model for *jouissance* was the infant’s encounter with “the big Other” of the mirror, which seemed the quintessence of full-bodied *jouissance*. We can now understand that the archetype of that *jouissance*, of that complete enjoyment is fully on the masculine side of the logic of sexuation: its fundamental model of satisfaction – *phallic jouissance* – is “detumescence,” the organ gratification of masturbation, which Lacan call “*la jouissance de l’idiot*”

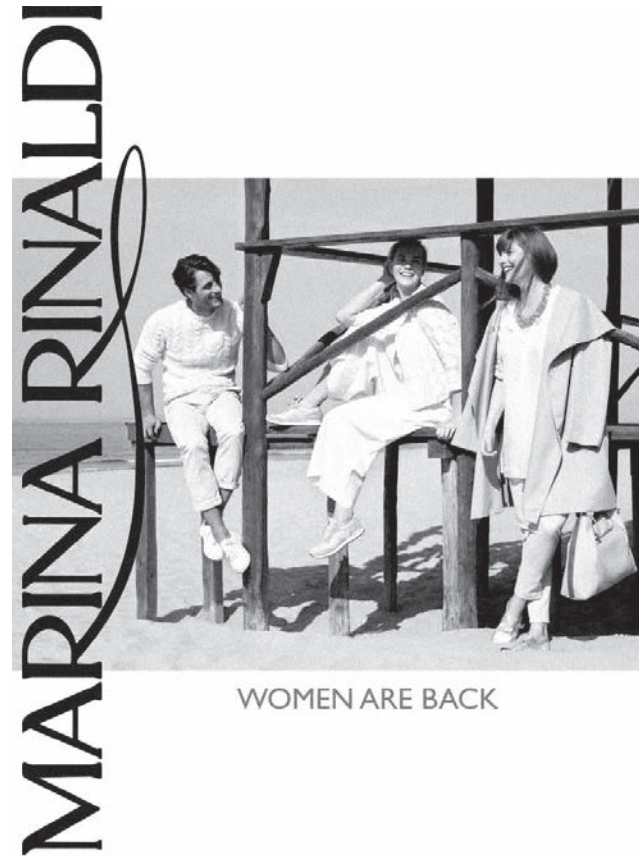
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⁴⁴ Jan Hoffman, “Sidelined by Adolescence” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2016, p. D5.

⁴⁵ In the 1960s, men were briefly as free in public as women to dress in flamboyant patterns and colors. Such free-play is now partially granted to men: “Torn trousers have been around for decades, but they now have embroidery, stencils or a dozen miniature pockets.” Cunningham, January 25, 2015.

(*Seminar XVII*).⁴⁶ To be fair, *Fashionistas* do periodically proclaim, “Women are Back!”

Fig. 14: Marina Rinaldi, 2014 [caption: Fashionistas proclaim, “Women are Back!”]



But they systematically belie their own rhetoric: here Marina Rinaldi models her oversized outfits that completely hide any anatomical differences from men (one of whom, in the same picture, is dressed almost exactly like the women, who are themselves dressed in clothing derivative of traditional men’s styling).

⁴⁶ In *Seminar XIV*, 1967 Lacan says that the true source of the big Other is what we are originally alienated from: our own *body*. *Seminar XIV. The Logic of the Phantasy*, 1966-1967, session of May 24, 1967, pp. 219 ff. [Cormac Gallagher translation, unpublished.]

In other fashion images female models are hard to distinguish from the wallpaper patterns behind them:



Fig. 15: Stella McCartney, 2014 [caption: Women as wallpaper]

Still others hide their models' faces under long hair – which would have defeated Kroeber's measuring efforts:



Fig. 16: Vera Wang, 2014, Chloé, 2014 [caption: these models are faceless...]

Feminists will wish to argue that gender equality in dress is a major advance: they can boast of successfully blocking the male gaze. Yet do we not need to ask a few harder questions here? The unmistakably female body shape has yielded to one virtually indistinguishable from that of the young boy. And yet the age-

old (male) habit of undressing women with their eyes has hardly gone away; now it is simply shared by everyone. The body we all now look for is not the sexual one, but the carefully muscled and toned body. Men once looked for the body under the clothes while women looked for the drape of the fabric that artfully covered or revealed it, but both now look for the sculpting of a muscle beneath the clothes. A former model turned actress is described this way:

To keep her weight at a svelte 130 pounds, she stays fit with a rigorous stretching and strengthening routine (her firm body tone is evident when compared to photos of her earlier modelling, where she was very slim but not toned).⁴⁷

If women *as such* have largely disappeared as a *specific difference* in the world of fashion, we need to ask not, “*Where* is her body?” but “*Why* has it disappeared so completely?”

Fig. 17: *Sports Illustrated* Model Robyn Lawley, 2015; Beyoncé at the White House [caption: Uproar over Lawley’s size (12) and Beyoncé’s curvaceousness]



Whenever a clearly female body makes its modest appearance, uproar ensues: parents complain that pictures of full bodied Beyoncé from a White House party

⁴⁷ <http://m.imdb.com/name/nm0005381/bio> <accessed 25 October, 2016>.

⁴⁸ *Sports Illustrated* model Robyn Lawley, 2015.

should not have been put online where they might be viewed by children; a size twelve model in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue recently provoked a huge, and slightly unfathomable, outcry. Feminists have long complained about women's bodies subjected to the male gaze, but they expressed even greater outrage when it was a young woman with an unmistakably feminine shape that was put on display. So long as the models look like young boys, not even feminists mind too much; they grumble, but they only strongly protest against a body that is all too identifiably female.

Encore

The “getting rid of sex” that Lacan points to as the originating point of capitalism only seems to have tried to submerge sexual difference by cutting off one side – the feminine. The result is that (in keeping with the Imaginary) there is no need for or grounds for any *desire* for something else – which Lacan once said was *the* fundamental desire. All you need is delivered and “satisfied” by images. Proof is found in the fashion show recently mounted by Rick Owens, in which his designs had peek-a-boo holes and slits that permitted the viewers to see the male organ beneath. It was intended to be as shocking as most of his other shows. But to me it denoted precisely the very *detumescence* that signals full satisfaction – of the male. No desire here, just satisfaction.

Alison Bancroft writes, “According to Mr Owens himself, the models were carefully cast according to height and proportions so that neither too much or too little of their member was on display.”⁴⁹

While Dr. Bancroft sees this group of runway models as transformative for masculine identity, I would beg to differ. We must be very cautious when we trumpet the absence of desire. In his *Seminar VII*, Lacan noted the following about getting rid of desire:

What is Alexander's proclamation when he arrived in Persepolis or Hitler's when he arrived in Paris? The preamble isn't important: “I have come to liberate you

⁴⁹ Alison Bancroft, “Masculinity, Masquerade and Display: Some thoughts on Rick Owens's Sphinx Collection and men on runways in general.” *alisonbancroft.com* accessed June 5, 2015.

from this or that.” The essential point is “Carry on working, work must go on.” Which, of course means: “let it be clear to everyone that this is on no account the moment to express the least surge of desire.” The morality of power, of the service of goods is as follows: “as far as desires are concerned, come back later, make them wait.”⁵⁰

Fig. 18: Rick Owens Sphinx Collection, 2015 [caption: Photograph: kollektivnoir/Instagram/Instamr. What better indicator of the absence of desire and of satisfied masculine *jouissance* than this peek-a-boo display of the detumescent male organ? Right: Dice.com billboard in San Francisco 2015



When the male does seek an object of enjoyment beyond his own body, the quest remains on a male model: the phallic woman. In contemporary fashion that “object” is now made quite openly into an imitation male body, with swimsuit models who must look more like young boys than full-bodied women.

Fantasies Of Egalitarianism

We already know what the fantasy images of “egalitarianism” shaped by the masculine universal look like: images of “equal enjoyment” for all meaning actual misery for all except the One who alone fully enjoys.⁵¹ Moreover, our concrete experience of the “One” with the unlimited *jouissance* is not even a person, a leader or a father, but *accumulated wealth* itself: “only money talks.” Theoretically, of course, this *wealth/jouissance* could be divided equally among the all members of the society – the postmodern thesis, a la Andrew Ross, of plenty for everyone. In reality, however, schemes to “redistribute the wealth” always seem to be confounded by the same primordial *envy* that originally structured group

⁵⁰ Lacan, 1992, p. 315.

⁵¹ In the male body this structure is “phallic”: the fantasy of *jouissance* is centered in the genitals. In the feminine, however, sites for *jouissance* are widespread over her whole body – the case also for the pervert.

psychology to begin with: the envy that demands each of you give up your enjoyment so that not one of your fellows, your equals, can lay claim to any either.

Where are the images of a *jouissance* that proceed from the *feminine* side of sexualisation? Where are there images coming from that feminine body which is never wholly under the command of the signifier, the body which is “not all” deprived of *jouissance*? This very body has been elided to the point of disappearance under (masculine) fantasies of “equal enjoyment.” What kind of social order might the feminine universal shape?

It is time for us to try this alternative, feminine model for *jouissance* in our age of the Imaginary. We cannot turn back the clock to Oedipus, for the Imaginary has always remained latent within it and it is now the established order. But countless efforts by social and cultural analysts and feminists and psychoanalytic thinkers to try to think their way through to this have not broken through the pre-eminence of the masculine. Rather, it is artists who have made the greatest advances: Marguerite Duras, Sophie Calle, Margaret Atwood, Hélène Cixous, Maya Angelou, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, but not only woman artists – for I include James Joyce (not a known feminist), Stendhal and Kleist as well.

Let us look, then to the *artists*, to those who can dream of *something else*, who can grasp the crucial need for *new images* to reshape our ideas about society today. Like French artist Sophie Calle who has never sacrificed an ounce of her femininity and who has offered us through it some of the most profound re-conceptions of society seen today.⁵²

Conclusion

The most crucial and incisive critiques of capitalist culture and the so-called “Society of the Spectacle” are not to be found in replications of the Frankfurt School or endless reiterations of Foucault’s theory of discursive practices. They emerge from studying closely Freud’s *Group Psychology* and after it, Lacan’s late

⁵² Sophie Calle’s magnificent installation, *The Eruv of Jerusalem* is one example. She interviews an equal number of Israelis and Palestinians about what sites in the city are special to them, discovering that each site is shared by both. See MacCannell 2004, and MacCannell 2012.

seminars, starting from *Seminar XVII (L'envers du psychanalyse)*. In that seminar Lacan pursued an in depth study of Freud's text and found it supplied him with the fundamentals of the psychology of capitalism – and of the strongest protest against it, the discourse of hysteria. In *Seminar XX* Lacan began taking woman very seriously, well beyond her initial role in theory as object of male desire. (He also went well beyond Freud's concepts of an envy-riddled femininity and a hysteria Freud largely used to characterize “woman”). In the figure of the feminine, Lacan finds the *other* “other” side of the discourse of capitalism by laying bare the logic of sexuation (the masculine and feminine models of castration). He steers well clear of claiming any symmetry or balance (or yin/yang) between their two universals: Equivalence of masculine/feminine is a fundamental fantasy Lacan already deconstructed in *Seminar XIV, La Logique du Phantasme*.

It is only, I think, that in *Seminar XXIII (The Imaginary)*, Lacan weaves his insights together to produce what a completely new model for creativity and for the ego, a model with the power to revolutionize Oedipal and capitalist discourse both – as I show in my recent essay on the open ego.⁵³ At the urging of his assistant, playwright H  l  ne Cixous, Lacan undertakes a study of the language of James Joyce. From Joyce, Lacan discovers the operation of a variant of language – *lalangue* – which does not expel *jouissance* and relegate it to the unconscious, but instead allows it to flow freely through its words. *Lalangue* is based not on the *signifier* but on what Lacan names the *sinthome*. Tsvetan Todorov and Barthes both argued that language without a literature to contest its domination is unbearably repressive (Barthes: “Language is quite simply, fascist”). Lacan determines a way out from under the regime of language without doing away with its chief rival, literary art.

It is from Joyce, too, that Lacan framed a new model for the ego⁵⁴ that completely overturns the longstanding psychoanalytic conception of the ego-as-bulwark against the unconscious and its drives, in favor of an ego that is *open* to all experience.⁵⁵

⁵³ MacCannell, “The Open Ego: Joyce, Woolf, and the ‘Mad’ Subject,” in M. Steinkoler and P. Gherovici, eds., *Lacan and Madness: Madness, Yes You Can't*, Routledge, New York 2015, pp. 205-218.

⁵⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII Le Sinthome*, 1975-76, Seuil, Paris 2014, p. 63.

⁵⁵ MacCannell, 2015, pp. 215-16.

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