School of Media, Culture, and Creative Arts

Politics, Perhaps? Philosophical Authority in the works of Badiou and Žižek

Francis Joseph Russell

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the contemporary critiques of postmodern philosophy that have emerged out of the work of the contemporary continental philosophers Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. These latter figures have been presented to an English speaking readership as potential correctives to the purported political indecisiveness of postmodern philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze. Badiou's and Žižek's respective influence within contemporary philosophical discourse suggests a renewed interest in a philosophical affirmation of heroism, greatness, and decisiveness, and the possibilities that such an affirmation might hold for thinking through emancipatory thought and action. By engaging with this contemporary trend in continental philosophy, this thesis seeks both to investigate the possibility of affirming the work of Badiou and Žižek as postmodern philosophers—thereby emphasizing the potential for their work to support intellectual pluralism—and to offer alternatives to the elitist ethos that their work potentially engenders. Such alternatives are developed in tandem with an engagement with John D. Caputo's pluralist disposition of "perhaps," a disposition he develops in order to challenge conventional notions of philosophical and theological authority. In pursuing this latter possibility a series of case studies is developed around quotidian and conventionally pejorative phenomena such as excess, laziness, and pessimism, in order to explore such phenomena as potential sites of resistance to late-capitalist hegemony in a manner that appears incommensurable with Badiou's and Žižek's emphasis on the heroic, great, and distinguished.

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Introduction

The text *Philosophy in the Present* documents the proceedings of a discussion held in Vienna in 2004 between two of Europe's most influential living philosophers, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. In this text Žižek argues that what is most important for contemporary philosophy is to point out the lack of a "radical choice" in our political discourse that could be seen as truly divergent from the functioning of global capitalism (51). On Žižek's account, the "liberal" attempt to tolerate difference, the conservative attack on the non-Western other of "radical Islam," and "fundamentalist terrorism" might appear as three radical political alternatives in the contemporary world—that is to say, three radically divergent ways of responding to the challenges we face in contemporary society—but are instead dead ends bound to the *status quo* (ibid, 51). Accordingly, Žižek argues that the present task for philosophy is to "change the concepts of the debate" (ibid, 51). To further clarify this point regarding the lack of a "radical choice" and the need for new concepts in the face of today's global capitalism, Žižek argues that to some extent we have been let down by the influential philosophers of our recent past. Žižek discusses an event organized in 2003 that included major philosophical figures such as Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas as an example of the failure for major public intellectuals to provide something like a "radical choice" amidst the functioning of global capitalism (ibid, 52). Žižek states that, while Derrida and Habermas might disagree with each other on philosophical grounds, "a glance at their political positions reveals another picture" (ibid, 52). Žižek continues, stating that "irrespective of their philosophical positions, they are all a little to the left of the democratic middle" (ibid, 52). Elsewhere he contends that while the same "left-of-centre liberal democratic stance" is to be expected from contemporary philosophers as diverse as "Derrida, Habermas, [Richard] Rorty and [Daniel] Dennet" one gets a sense that philosophers such as Alain Badiou or Martin Heidegger "would definitely adopt a different stance" ("Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!" 127-8). The implication here is that the major intellectual figures of what is sometimes referred to as "postmodernism" have

failed to offer radical alternatives to the present situation in which global capitalism continues uninterrupted despite the severe structural violence it perpetuates. For Žižek, there is a typological difference between these "left-liberal" philosophers and the likes of Heidegger and Badiou. On Žižek's account, while figures like Derrida and Habermas might disagree philosophically, and thereby present the appearance of alternatives and therefore choice, these figures ultimately coincide when it comes to protecting the liberal democracies that underpin globalization. Indeed, in her *Žižek: A Critical Introduction*, Sarah Key argues that what makes Žižek distinct amongst contemporary philosophers is that he utterly rejects the satisfaction with the *status quo* that he feels is exhibited by many influential philosophers and intellectuals (148). Kay writes that, against contemporary liberal "beautiful souls"—those intellectuals that "wring their hands over the current state of affairs while, in fact benefiting under it and passively promoting it"—Žižek distinguishes himself through his "determination to dare" (ibid, 148). In this association between Žižek's work and some sense of daringness, we find a framing device that is indicative of the way Žižek, and Badiou—to whom we will turn in a moment—have been received in the English speaking world. Against a purported intellectual *status quo* that precludes real alternatives, radical action, and, more generally speaking, decisiveness, Žižek is presented as a corrective, one who offers a possible return of the thinking of true change and true action. Interestingly, in a text that is deeply critical of Žižek's politics and philosophical thought, "All the Right Questions, All the Wrong Answers," Jeremy Gilbert affirms this framing device insofar as he states that

> no one who has ever tried to work in cultural studies from a perspective that is even conscious of the global hegemony of neo-liberalism and its social consequences can fail to be dismayed by the atmosphere of complete disengagement which seems to infuse much 'cultural studies' and related areas of thought: the sheer absence of any sustained attempt to analyse the current political conjuncture within those fields is enough to drive many people into the arms of Lenin and Badiou. (77)

While Gilbert takes Žižek to task for being, on his account, unfair and uncharitable in his reading of thinkers such as Derrida, Gilbert nevertheless affirms Žižek for asking the "right questions" even if he thinks he provides the "wrong answers" (ibid, 72). Gilbert states that, while he takes issue with Žižek on many levels, "Žižek is certainly right to discern a chronic and disabling lack of strategic thinking on much of the contemporary radical scene, and a similarly disabling distaste for militancy amongst

so called 'radical' intellectuals" (ibid, 72). For Žižek, such distaste for militancy—which functions, on his account, to inhibit the possibility of a radical and decisive change—is tantamount to the "postmodern philosophical ideology" itself (*Philosophy in the Present*, 59). For the philosophers of postmodernity, Žižek argues, we simply have to "live with our imperfect world" since "any radical alternative sooner or later would lead to the Gulag," and it is this fear of the consequences of radical and decisive action that precludes an affirmation of "any event—in the Badiouian sense of the rupturing new" (ibid, 58).

Given that Žižek sees the "postmodern philosophical ideology" as being incompatible with the "Badiouian" sense of the "event," and, furthermore, that this is purportedly indicative of what is problematic about postmodern philosophy, we shall now turn to Badiou's own criticisms of postmodernism, and his theory of the event, to better clarify such a critique. In his book *Pocket Pantheon: Figures of Postwar Philosophy*, Badiou provides a series of critical reflections on a range of postwar French philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. In his reflections on the work of Derrida, a section of the book that slides between askance critique and heartfelt praise, Badiou raises a question regarding the status of decisiveness in philosophy, a question that receives a certain force due to its association with the further question of philosophy's relationship to politics. Badiou writes that,

> in all the questions in which he intervened, Derrida was what I call a brave man of peace. He was brave because it takes a lot of courage not to enter into the division as it is constituted. And he was a man of peace because identifying what excepts itself from that opposition is, as a general rule, the road to peace. For any true peace is based upon an agreement not about that which exists, but about that which non-exists. This diagonal obstinacy, this rejection of abrupt metaphysically derived divisions, is obviously not suited to stormy times when everything comes under the law of decisiveness, here and now. That is what kept Derrida apart from the truth of the red years between 1968 and 1976. Because the truth of those years spoke its name with the words: 'One divides into two.' What we desired, in poetic terms, was the metaphysics of radical conflict, and not the patient deconstruction of oppositions. And Derrida could not agree about that. He had to go away. He went into exile, so to speak. (*Pocket Pantheon*, 138-9)

In this passage, Badiou presents us with two starkly opposed approaches to the question of political engagement that also draw parallels to the ways in which Badiou distinguishes his philosophical work from that of Derrida. For Badiou, Derrida was

unable to make contact with the "truth" of the "red years" of 1968-76, a period of time in France that bore witness to militant political struggles, particularly for those associated with France's then various branches of communism (*Metapolitics*, 134-5). During this period, in which political radicals engaged in fierce *polemos* or struggle, Derrida avoided affirming demands to clarify his position on relevant subjects such as Marx's legacy, communism, and the hope of revolution in Europe. Indeed, so careful was Derrida to avoid assuming strident political positions that, in a 1971 letter to his contemporary Gérard Granel, Derrida acknowledged that his attitude "may wrongly give the impression of apoliticism, or rather apraxia" (as quoted in Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, 221). However for Badiou, Derrida's unwillingness to take sides during the "stormy times when everything comes under the law of decisiveness" is both an indication of Derrida's commitment to rejecting presupposed oppositions and false choices, and an indication of his insulation from the "truth" of those years: "one divides into two." This formulation—taken from Mao Zedong and, as Alexander C. Cook argues, originally used as a means of articulating what Mao saw as the universality of struggle and opposition ("Introduction: The Spiritual Atom Bomb And Its Global Fallout," 7)—would be adapted by Badiou and feature prominently throughout his oeuvre.[1] In the context of Badiou's thought, other than as an affirmation of radical conflict, "one divides into two" can be understood as the rejection of the concept of a unified one or whole on both ontological and political grounds. As Badiou argues,

> truth is what has *no identity other than from a difference*; hence the being of all things is the process of its division into two. For as much as we apprehend the qualitative identity of a force, it remains with respect to:
> 1. the place that it exceeds
> 2. the structural system (system of distribution) that it destroys.
> (*The Rational Kernel of the Hegelian Dialectic*, 60)

Here, Badiou appears to be making both an ontological and political declaration. He states that the "qualitative identity of a force"—i.e., that a force can assume an identity—remains alongside the place that it exceeds and the structural system that, through the force's having exceeded it, comes ultimately to breakdown. Politically and ontologically, forces gain their identity through their rupture or break with what is

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[1] For a detailed account of the place of this concept throughout Badiou's work see "One Divides Into Two? Dividing the Conditions" by Tzuchien Tho and "The One Divides in Two," from *Laruelle: Against the Digital* by Alexander R. Galloway.

and thereby disrupt any supposedly unified or totalized presentation of being or state. Though *The Rational Kernel of the Hegelian Dialectic* was published in the late nineteen seventies, and therefore appeared prior to the development of Badiou's theory of "event" (see *Being and Event*), the basic premise can be found here in embryonic form. What Badiou would later refer to as an "event" is precisely the moment when a situation that was thought of as unified and whole splits in two through the interruption of some unforeseeable novelty, whether this occurs in the domain of politics, science, art, or love. Moreover, it is this sense of a radical break that Žižek argues is discredited by postmodern philosophy.

However, in what sense was Derrida kept apart from this truth, this truth that is the truth of the years of political turmoil that Badiou mentions? And, furthermore, how does this relate to Žižek's allegation that postmodern philosophy is incapable of affirming the event as Badiou describes it? Perhaps, for Badiou, Derrida was kept apart from such a truth because he avoided being swept away by the revolutionary mood that such a formulation emerged from. Indeed, and as Alexander C. Cook has argued, the formulation "one divides into two" expressed the Maoist view that struggle, conflict, and radicality were inseparable both from a people's struggle against state-oppression and an individual's struggle with their own reactionary tendencies ("Introduction: The Spiritual Atom Bomb And Its Global Fallout," 8). As the Chinese Communist Party's newspaper *The People's Daily* announced on July 19 1968, "to look at oneself according to the law of 'one divides into two' means that one must make revolution against one's own subjective world as well as the objective world" (quoted in ibid, 8). Indeed, and as we shall see later in this introduction, Badiou's notion of the event, while certainly not identical to this discussion of "one divides into two," never loses such an emphasis on militancy and decisiveness. Furthermore, it seems that it is this willingness to be decisive and to take sides that Badiou finds lacking in Derrida's thought. As Christopher Norris states, while Badiou shows an appreciation for his work, this critique of Derrida reveals that,

> Badiou's patience is in shorter supply than Derrida's and that it is liable to run out rather swiftly if confronted with too many examples of the painstaking textual analysis that might have kept some disciples of Derrida away from the barricade. (*Derrida, Badiou and the Formal Imperative*, 5)

Moreover, for both Badiou and Žižek, it appears that the postmodern philosophical position is one of discrediting and inhibiting such radical decisiveness. Indeed, and as

Peter Hallward has argued in *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, for Badiou in particular the postmodern philosopher assumes the guise of a sophist, a figure that dissociates philosophy from the decisiveness of "true" action (16). Hallward states that for Badiou "sophism sets in once philosophy is reduced to the level of mere discourse or conversation […]" (ibid, 16).

Given the emphasis that both Badiou and Žižek place on the need for philosophy to provide a "radical choice" amidst the prevailing order of global capitalism, and given their strident critiques of postmodern philosophy, the recent popularity of their work might be taken to signal some sense of a resurgence of the value of decisiveness in contemporary philosophy. Certainly, questions of how we might best share our lives with one another—so as to avoid, to the greatest extent possible, violence and pain—have always had a place within philosophical thought. And invariably the key figures in the philosophical tradition have sought to ground their responses to those questions, their formulations on how to live the good life or to build a fair and just society, on a virtue, principle or obligation that can provide certainty—such as Plato's Republic, Kant's Reason, and Rawls's Justice. Yet the recent emphasis, particularly in works by or inspired by Badiou and Žižek, on the importance of decisiveness as a necessary condition for the emergence of anything resembling an emancipatory politics in thought and action appears unusual given its occurrence in the wake of the work that defined continental philosophy in the mid- to late-twentieth century. For the work that has come to be known as "postmodern philosophy" or sometimes "postmodern theory" is not typically associated with the sense of surety and decisiveness that was once felt requisite to the work of an emancipatory politics or theory of distributive justice. Indeed, it is more regularly ridiculed for its supposed lack of any philosophical, let alone political, sense. As Niall Lucy and Steve Mickler have argued, attacking postmodern thought has become something of a "bipartisan sport," one that is played by those with right wing tendencies so as to "denigrate a version of the educated middle-class left as dragon hunting dreamers who believe that all cultures are equal and history is a myth," and by those with left-wing tendencies so as to "distinguish serious and practical concerns from the 'soft' ideas of dragon-hunting dreamers" in their own turn ("The Postmodern Left," 188). It is perhaps not surprising that many fail to see the political import of "postmodern philosophy," let alone its import for an emancipatory politics, since its

major theoretical references—figures such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and the French "post-structuralists" Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard—did not approach political questions in straightforward, systemic, or programmatic fashions. Thus, while these figures certainly did write on politics—famous examples being Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, and Derrida's *Specters of Marx*—these works lacked a sufficient directness and decisiveness to protect them from accusations of "dragon-hunting" from figures on the left and right alike. In light of this conventional depiction of postmodern philosophy, it is noteworthy and yet slightly perplexing that recent living heirs to the lineage of postmodern thought, such as the hugely influential philosophers Badiou and Žižek, assert the necessity of decisiveness, and openly critique the indecisiveness of "postmodernism," placing their work in the odd position of being deeply connected to the postmodern tradition while being arguably an extrication from it as a theoretical tradition. Both Badiou and Žižek are renowned as being both idiosyncratic thinkers—producing works that are as complex and obscure as any of their predecessors—and yet they are also sometimes depicted as representing a return to the need to affirm political decisiveness and "true" emancipatory politics. Such a situation therefore raises a host of questions: is there evidence of a return to decisive political thinking in contemporary philosophy? was there ever really a "postmodern left" that fits the image of an intellectual elite resigned to obscure, a-political textual exegesis? and, furthermore, can we call the works of figures like Badiou and Žižek a rejection of postmodern indecisiveness and a return to "true" emancipatory politics?

To put these two figures in a broader philosophical context it must be noted that Badiou's and Žižek's influence seems to have greatly intensified after Derrida's death. In some ways Derrida featured as the last figure in an incredible sequence of French twentieth-century philosophers who commanded a great deal of international respect, and who often produced deep engagements with each others work. While Badiou was a contemporary of those aforementioned French philosophers—to which we could add the names Louis Althusser, Paul Ricœur, Félix Guattari, and the still living Jean-Luc Nancy—Badiou's work was largely ignored in the English speaking world, as is evinced by the late translation of Badiou's major work *Being and Event* in 2005—a text that was originally published in France in 1988. Similarly, while Žižek

has been writing philosophical and political works since the early nineteen-seventies, and wrote his first English language text *The Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989, it was not until the late 1990s, if not perhaps later, that his status grew to that of an internationally renowned philosopher. This is not to claim that the death of Derrida was responsible for their respective emergence as "major" or "great" philosophers, but, instead, merely to indicate that Derrida's passing was a useful pretext for asserting a "break" with a previous tradition of continental philosophy, from which Badiou and Žižek would be discussed as having in some sense left behind. Indeed, Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman make just such a move when they frame the end of the "linguistic turn" in philosophy—a phrase frequently associated with notions of "postmodern philosophy"—in terms of the death of Derrida, the end of the philosophical lineage he "belonged" to, and the rise of Badiou and Žižek ("Towards a Speculative Philosophy," 1-2). However, for these recent theorists, it would be misguided to cynically presume that Badiou and Žižek are simply the "next big thing" in the world of international philosophy—or, rather, the world of international philosophical publishing—as their at times complimentary, and yet nevertheless distinct, philosophical projects are characterized as breaking with the past tendencies of postmodern thought. As Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman argue, the shift away from the practices of "postmodern" or "post-structuralist" philosophy is not merely motivated by a desire for exploring novel approaches in thinking, but is rather framed in terms of the need to decide between what is characterized as the conventional philosophical positions of the late twentieth century and a metaphysically speculative and philosophically realist form of thought that is supposedly better equipped to deal with the problems of the contemporary world. Accordingly, they argue that

> without deriding the significant contributions of these [postmodern or post-structuralist] philosophies, something is clearly amiss in these trends. In the face of the looming ecological catastrophe, and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world (including our own bodies), it is not clear that the anti-realist position is equipped to face up to these developments. The danger is that the dominant anti-realist strain of continental philosophy has not only reached a point of decreasing returns, but that it now actively limits the capacities of philosophy in our time. (ibid, 3)

For these thinkers there is a need to announce a decisive break with the past traditions of supposedly anthropocentric philosophy. They characterize an emphasis on the

human perspective and textual experimentation as being the major weaknesses of the prevailing traditions of continental philosophy. Indeed, in many ways their framing of the text *The Speculative Turn* provides a clear injunction to choose between "tradition" and new forms of thought by providing a narrative of its own "break" with that tradition, and by announcing the political potential of such a move. The figures associated with the speculative turn champion the arrival of a break with postmodern philosophy, not because they reject philosophy in favour of disciplines that may prove more immediately practical in the fight against major catastrophes such as global warming—like climate science, for example—but because they affirm the power of a new kind of philosophy to speak to such issues with renewed relevance and decisiveness once it has extricated itself from what is depicted as the dead ends of postmodern thought.

In order to appreciate precisely what the apparent "dead ends" of postmodern thought entail we can turn back to Badiou's and Žižek's own work. This is vital, not only because Badiou's and Žižek's criticisms of postmodern thought predate and inform the kind of discussion made by Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek, but also because of the inextricable connection between Badiou's and Žižek's criticisms of postmodernism and their own positive contribution to contemporary philosophy. For both of these figures, that is, a radical reinitiating of philosophy's ontological project is needed in the wake of the respective critiques of metaphysics that emerged out of hermeneutics, as exemplified for Badiou by a figure like Heidegger; out of analytic philosophy, as exemplified by Carnap; and out of postmodern philosophy as exemplified by Lyotard (*Infinite Thought*, 33-5). However, neither Badiou nor Žižek hold that philosophy is sufficient to produce an ontology that could overcome the aporias located by these aforementioned critiques, and, therefore, both intervene on philosophy with regards to the question of ontology. This is to say that Badiou and Žižek question what we could call the sufficiency of philosophy with regards to ontology. Or, in other words, while both assert that philosophy is a necessary condition for a feasible contemporary ontology, they do not hold that philosophy is sufficient to produce one in itself. Such a critique of philosophical sufficiency ends up with two very different paths to what are ultimately related philosophical positions. For Badiou, ontology must be subtracted from philosophy and recognized as already occurring in mathematics—particularly in the mathematical disciplines of set theory

and category theory. He states that, "since the Greeks," mathematics has existed as the "science of being qua being," although it is "only today that we have the means to *know* this" (*Being and Event*, 3). For some, the choice of mathematics as the discipline that can produce a viable contemporary ontology is largely contingent on Badiou's predilections and does not rest on some essential characteristic of mathematics *per se*. Indeed, Ed Pluth poses the question, in his introductory work on Badiou, *Badiou: A Philosophy of the New*, as to whether or not we really need to approach mathematics at all in order to understand Badiou's principal philosophical views (46). Indeed, Badiou makes the argument himself that it is possible to read a work like *Being and Event* without the formal mathematical discussions and instead to focus on the more hermeneutic and textual sections (*Being and Event*, 19). Nevertheless, for Badiou, the construction of a viable contemporary approach to ontology could not have been possible without his turn to innovations in the non-philosophical disciplines of modern and contemporary mathematics. Similarly, Žižek couples a critique of the sufficiency of philosophical ontology with the odd move of refracting the ontological systems of nineteenth-century German idealism—especially the works of G.W.F. Hegel—through the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan. As Žižek admits in the preface to his *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, such an approach can only appear obscure since, for most, the thought of attempting to revitalize a thoroughly discredited discipline by problematizing it with another deeply discredited discipline will of course appear doubly foolish (viii).

Arguably, what both figures do is point towards the need for bringing philosophy into contact with a conditional non-philosophical other such as mathematics or psychoanalysis in order to build ontological systems that attend to some negative lack or subtraction rather than positive giving or presence. As Peter Hallward has indicated, the set theoretical systems that Badiou draws upon challenge any ontology of presence precisely insofar as they begin, not from positing some fully present being, but from positing the void (*Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 100-1). Hallward clarifies what this means by explaining that within set theory, which is the study of the relationships of sets or groups—sets or groups that are only defined in terms of their belonging to other sets and groups—"all multiples are multiples of multiples" except for a certain mathematical function that has to be posited: the void,

the "multiple of nothing" (ibid, 101).[2] In set theory, "to exist is to belong to a set," and yet such existence as belonging is founded on the void as that to which no existence can be designated (*Being and Event*, 187-188). Similarly, Žižek's ontological discussion of capitalism begins, neither from the grasping of some static full presence nor a dynamic partial appearing of capital's essence, but instead from the Lacanian notion of the real as that which is radically irreducible to existence and yet nevertheless *insists* through certain ruptures and displacements in existence. What Lacanian psychoanalysis can provide ontology with is the thinking of the real as all pervasive—at least insofar as it can be detected through ruptures that could happen anywhere or at any time—and yet utterly foreclosed, resisting any positive or normative determination.

This association of being, or what *is,* with the "void" or the "real" as that which absolutely *isn't*, is vital for Badiou and Žižek insofar as it is the catalyst for their respective thinking through the political implications of radical ruptures and fissures in the domain of the "natural" or the "normal." That is to say, Badiou and Žižek both develop terms for the radical irruption of novelty into a seemingly stable situation by radically destabilizing and detotalizing their accounts of existence through the notions of void and real. In other words, the negative space opened up by the void or the real, as that which everything participates in and yet does not contain or grasp, is utilized by Badiou and Žižek to point towards the manifestation of something previously deemed impossible that, through its very emergence, forces a shift in the very demarcation of possibility. While it would be problematic to assert that the "event" and the "act" are entirely synonymous, Žižek frequently refers to Badiou's thinking of the event as being in some sense exchangeable with his own thinking of the act. For instance, in one of Žižek's more recent books *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, he argues that Badiou is "*the* thinker of the act" (427). Furthermore, in linking his own thinking of the "act" with Badiou's thinking of the "event" Žižek gestures towards the political character of both. He argues that whereas the thinking of what to do in a particular situation will always be caught within a certain degree of complexity, and one that can produce a sense in which "the pondering of pros and cons is never over," Žižek maintains that

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[2] As Patrick Suppes states in *Axiomatic Set Theory*, "intuitively we mean by *set* or *class* a collection of entities of any sort" and that "in ordinary mathematics the words 'set,' 'class,' 'collection,' and 'aggregate' are synonyms […]" (1).

his "act," as with Badiou's event, entails a "radical and violent simplification" (ibid, 427). Žižek elaborates, stating that against the possibility of "endless procrastination" one can oppose the "magical moment" of the act, "when the infinite pondering crystallizes itself into a simple 'yes' or 'no'" (ibid, 427). This statement should not be misunderstood as a definition of the "act" or the "event" as that moment when one suddenly realizes that "yes" or "no" happens to be the right answer to a particular problem. Instead, to adopt Badiou's and Žižek's vocabularies, the event is "on the edge of the void" and the act is "transposed into the dimension of the real" (*Being and Event*, 184; *Looking Awry*, 139).

In order to grasp what is at stake in this association of the "event" and the "act" with the "void" and the "real" we can turn to Badiou's and Žižek's respective accounts of subjectivity. For Badiou, we can only speak of the "event" insofar as we can speak of a subject that holds a fidelity to the event (*Infinite Thought*, 46-7). Badiou clarifies the nature of this relationship between subject and event when he states that

> a subject is constituted by an utterance in the form of a wager. This utterance is as follows: 'This event has taken place, it is something which I can neither evaluate, nor demonstrate, but to which I shall be faithful.' To begin with, a subject is what fixes an undecidable event, because he or she takes the chance of deciding upon it. This decision opens up the infinite procedure of verification of the true. (ibid, 47)

However, Badiou's discussion of the subject does not refer to the individual human being—whether understood in terms of the transcendental structure of human reason or immanent materiality of the human body—but must be understood as the material trace of something that signals an exception to the ordering of a situation. Badiou clarifies the status of the subject, as it features in his thought, when he states in *Logics of Worlds* that there is a certain "syntactical induction of the subject":

> its mark is certainly not to be found in pronouns—the 'I' or 'we' of first persons. Rather it is in the 'aside from,' the 'except that,' the 'but for' through which the fragile scintillation of what has no place to be makes its incision in the unbroken phrasing of a world. (45)

Indeed, Badiou argues that the fidelity shown to an event is actually a process of subjectivisation through which the human animal, the organic body that properly belongs to such pronouns as "I" or "we," is "traversed and overcome" *(Infinite Thought*, 55). Accordingly, since the subject is only designated through the

emergence of an event—insofar as the human animal rolls the dice and commits itself to some rupture with the situation—the validity or significance of which it cannot ultimately ground or guarantee in any previously existing knowledge or custom, the event is, according to Razmig Keucheyan, "on the side of non-being, of what is not counted in the state of the situation" (*The Left Hemisphere*, 178). However, it is perhaps too severe to state that the event is on the side of "non-being," since, according to Badiou, the event gives rise to new practices and forms of knowledge through a procedure of verifying the event, and that this process of verification is infinite insofar as it has no finite limit, *telos*, or end. For this reason, it is perhaps better to use Badiou's formulation that the event is "on-the-edge-of-the-void," since the event is both irreducible to what is presented as existing and to what is entirely foreclosed to existence, known by the nomination "void" (*Being and Event*, 189). Indeed, given the decisive character of Badiou's subject, as the figure that reaches across the void in order to pursue an evental truth, it is perhaps not surprising that he takes "militant" to be a synonym for the subject. Badiou states that regardless of the domain of the truth event—whether amorous, artistic, scientific, or political—the subject that maintains its fidelity is a militant, since "the militant of a truth is not only the political militant working for the emancipation of humanity in its entirety. He or she is also the artist-creator, the scientist who opens up a new theoretical field, or the lover whose world is enchanted" (ibid, xiii).

In a similar vein Žižek elaborates his association of the "act" and the "real" via the development of a theory of subjectivity. As Keucheyan states, Žižek's theory of the subject is deeply indebted to Lacanian theory and the respective notions of "symbolic" and "real" as feature in the French psychoanalyst's work (*Left Hemisphere*, 184). The symbolic, which for Lacan designates the field of language and therefore of meaning, is open to the perennial threat of being disrupted through coming into contact with its limit and finitude—a limit that is nominated by the term "real." In Žižek's system, the subject is discussed as belonging neither to the symbolic nor the real, but instead functions as "an interface" between the symbolic and its limit, and is therefore not a substantial entity but instead a "'void' composed of pure 'negativity'" (ibid, 184). Therefore, while the symbolic space of language and meaning certainly does frame the conceptual and existential possibilities of the human being, this human being is a subject insofar as it has the capacity to radically disrupt

the operations of the symbolic space. As Žižek clarifies, his subject is not a figure of integration—of integrating symbolically codified meanings into their sense of self, thereby moving towards a sense of identity, no matter how partial—but is instead "an uncanny 'acephalous' subject" whose meaning is ultimately foreclosed to the symbolic (*The Ticklish Subject*, 460). What Žižek refers to as the "act" is therefore that moment where the subject cuts themselves off from the knowledge and custom that the symbolic space supports and instead acts "*ex nihilo*, without any phantasmatic support" (ibid, 460). The "act" is decisional in a similar way to Badiou's "event," therefore, not because a self-present subject begins a process of weighing up pros and cons and then choosing a particular path, but because the act has no other anchor or ground other than the enacting of the subject themselves (ibid, 462). As Žižek states,

> the decision is purely formal, ultimately a decision to decide, without a clear awareness of WHAT the subject decides about; it is non-psychological act [*sic*], unemotional, with no motives, desires or fears; it is incalculable, not the outcome of strategic argumentation; it is a totally free act, although one couldn't do it otherwise. It is only AFTERWARDS that this pure act is "subjectivized," translated into a (rather unpleasant) psychological experience. ("The Act and its Vicissitudes," n.p.)

Accordingly, Žižek's and Badiou's works seem to support two contradictory positions regarding the relationship between postmodern philosophy, decision, and the possibility of emancipatory politics. On the one hand, we find that Badiou and Žižek both affirm the possibility of powerful moments of rupture that are radically undecidable and contingent. Since the "event" and the "act" involve a radical disruption of normative understandings of a situation, or of what is possible within a situation, the outcomes of such ruptures cannot be decided in advance. And yet, on the other hand, both Žižek and Badiou maintain the necessity of decision when thinking through the possibility of "true" political emancipation. For both, the decision to "roll the dice" and to take part in the process of extrapolating the consequences of such a decision must take precedence over existential and conceptual possibilities that can be spoken of as already belonging to a situation. The question this raises is how we are to reconcile these two levels, that of the undecidable and a certain insistence on decision. Given that what appears to be significant for Badiou and Žižek is that one decides in a field of undecidability—that one decides knowing full well that this decision is ultimately undecidable—their thought appears to be deeply connected to that of postmodern philosophy, insofar as it rejects the

dominance of empirical and positivistic truth as a means of grounding thought and action, and thoroughly anti-postmodern insofar as it provides the injunction for a certain kind of decisiveness, perhaps even militancy. Both figures present work that appears to affirm pluralism—criticizing the sufficiency of philosophy and attacking the policing of normative boundaries—and yet both privilege a kind of sovereignty in the subjective act of fidelity above all else. Therefore, such problems return us to the questions with which we began. To what extent can we find in these two contemporary figures a corrective to postmodern "dragon-chasing" and indecision? How do we accord the roles that pluralism and a strange kind of militant fidelity play in their work with the notion that they serve such a corrective to the supposed malignancies of postmodern thought? And what are the consequences of this affirmation of decisiveness, particularly the queer brand that both Badiou and Žižek espouse, for contemporary philosophical investigations into the possibility of emancipatory actions and thought?

In an attempt to address such questions, this thesis seeks, with reference to key works in contemporary continental philosophy and cultural theory, to examine the nature and implication of this contemporary character of decisiveness. The first chapter engages in greater detail and complexity with the respective critiques of postmodern philosophy that we find in the work of Badiou, Žižek, and other contemporary theorists who are influenced by these figures. That chapter focuses particularly on the manner in which Badiou and Žižek position the strengths of their own approaches to thinking through emancipatory politics by presenting themselves as a corrective to a postmodern tradition of thought that they see as being a symptom of, if not in some sense complicit with, late capitalism. Following on from this discussion, the second chapter attempts to uncover a possible major influence on the decisional character of Badiou's and Žižek's thought in the figure of Martin Heidegger. In particular, the discussion explores the relationship between Heidegger's narrative of modern crisis and Badiou's and Žižek's own thinking of the contemporary world of late capitalism as a time that demands a certain decisiveness and radical action. Furthermore, in engaging with the works of John D. Caputo, a figure who has spent some time on the thinking of decision as feature in the work of Badiou and Žižek, we shall pose the question of the kinds of political resistance and emancipation that can be conceptualized once the decisional component of the

"event" and "act" has been brought into question. Chapter three engages with the possibility that such a call for a return to decisiveness in philosophy might contribute to the stratification of notions of resistance, and the delimitation of the resistant from the non-resistant, by way of privileging certain phenomena over others and through the production of elitist hierarchies. From there, chapters four to six test this general hypothesis more closely via a series of case studies that explore marginalized or conventionally pejorative phenomena as possible sites of thinking through the question of emancipatory or counter-hegemonic thought and action.

Chapter One:
Philosophical Decisions

As we saw in the introduction, the works of Badiou and Žižek are conventionally situated *against* some sense of a postmodern tradition or lineage, the ideas of which are, so the argument goes, inhibiting and restrictive for contemporary thought—especially the attempt to think through the possibility of a "truly" emancipatory politics. The corrective measure that Badiou and Žižek purportedly provide to the postmodern tradition is a renewed emphasis on the importance of a fidelity to the possibility for a radical rupture with a presently existing situation. However, both Badiou and Žižek acknowledge that the radical "decision" to embrace an "event" or "act," through which the subject is formed over the abyss of the "void" or "real," is itself entirely incommensurable with the positions offered by any currently existing positive body of knowledge. Žižek writes of Badiou's conception of the militant, that, from the position of a situation of knowledge, be it political or otherwise, the militant subjective figure can only seem to be mad, carried along by a near meaningless discourse that has no positive position within established knowledge (*The Ticklish Subject*, 156). So, while Badiou and Žižek are discussed as two major contemporary continental philosophers who have extricated themselves from the textual "dragon-chasing" of postmodernism, and have accordingly been able to return philosophy to a "true" thinking of emancipatory politics, their respective privileging of the "event" and the "act" seems to repeat a fundamental postmodern philosophical strategy: the undermining of the dominance of empiricism, positivism, and scientific "objectivity" as foundations for politics. Moreover, in both figures we find a certain affirmation of difference, or of an intellectual pluralism, that raises further the question of the relationship between Badiou, Žižek, and postmodern thought. Given these potential inconsistencies, it is worth engaging with Badiou's and Žižek's critiques of postmodern philosophy in much greater detail, and, in doing so we can perhaps clarify the role that their emphasis on "decision" plays within contemporary philosophy more broadly speaking.

On Badiou's account, postmodern philosophy represents a "real danger for thinking in general and for philosophy in particular" insofar as postmodern thought, while "infinitely subtle, complex and brilliant," functions ultimately to "render philosophy incapable of sustaining the desire which is proper to it in the face of the pressure exerted by the contemporary world" (*Infinite Thought*, 35). Badiou states that there is of course "a multiplicity of language games," but that such an admission should not relieve philosophy of the task of attempting to rethink the status of the universal and of the philosophical category of truth in light of such a multiplicity (ibid, 35-6). For Badiou, to simply abandon the universal in favour of an affirmation of the particular, or to locate truth contingently within the particular language-game, is to run the risk of never assuming the challenge "that is put out to [philosophy] by a world subordinated to the merchandising of money and information" (ibid, 36). Badiou continues, stating that, "this world is an anarchy of more or less regulated, more or less coded fluxes, wherein money, products and images are exchanged. If philosophy is to sustain its desire in such a world, it must propose a principle of interruption" (ibid, 36).

As Žižek has neatly and approvingly summarized, Badiou's project involves a certain return to metaphysics—and a strong affirmation of conventional metaphysical terms such as "being," "truth," and "universality"—in the hope of bringing about, against "postmodern *doxa*," a "resurrection of the *politics of (universal) Truth* in today's condition of global contingency" (*The Ticklish Subject*, 151). It is appropriate that Žižek parenthesizes the term "universal" in this passage, insofar as Badiou's conception of the universal is not necessarily opposed to notions of singularity or concreteness as is conventional in the metaphysical tradition. When Badiou speaks of universals it is important to remember that he does so in order to further explicate his theory of truth, a theory that cannot be neatly subsumed under the rubrics of previous metaphysical systems. Indeed, Badiou highlights the connection between truth and universality in his system in stating that "the process of the universal or truth" is "one and the same" ("Eight Theses on the Universal," 146). What Badiou means by this, however, is that what he calls the "event" is the opening up, for a subject, of a singular truth that is universal and irreducible to every particularity (ibid, 146). If we take the example of a revolution as a hypothetical Badiouian political truth event, the singularity of this truth event would refer to its being embedded in one situation as

opposed to others, and in the concrete and prolonged actions of those who serve as the material trace of this evental rupture with the situation. Badiou makes the distinction between "singular" and "particular" to distinguish between the undecidability of the subject's pursuit of a truth—i.e., their pursuit of the revolution through an attempted overthrowing of the state—and the dominant knowledge of the situation (ibid, 146). For Badiou, determinations such as those of race, gender, and class, belong to the order of particularity and have a positive—albeit incomplete—place within a situation (ibid, 146). Due to the particularity of this knowledge, the knowledge that is dominant and thereby customary in a particular situation, it cannot function as a form of resistance—as the condition for "true" change—because, as Badiou insists elsewhere, "all resistance is a rupture with what is. And every rupture begins, for those engaged in it, through a rupture with oneself" (*Metapolitics*, 7). Against the particular knowledge of the situation Badiou opposes the singular or concrete universality of the event of truth as a fundamental break with knowledge and particularity. "If the universal is for everyone," Badiou writes, "this is in the precise sense that to be inscribed within it is not a matter of possessing any particular determination" ("Eight Theses on the Universal," 154). Therefore, on Badiou's account, political truth events such as the French Revolution are "singular" insofar as they occur in excess to a given situation and can only occur through a kind of concrete and active engagement. Furthermore, they are "universal" insofar as they are open to anyone who is seized by a fidelity to the event of this truth. Following Badiou's account, no knowledge of the particular can guarantee that the revolution is taking place. Indeed, the "reactive denial that the event took place" can be the only response of the state—whose knowledge will explain that any "revolution" is merely an illegitimate act of populist violence (ibid, 151). What is universally "on offer," so to speak, for anyone in proximity to the event in question—caught up in its singularity or concreteness—is accordingly the possibility of the pursuit of a truth that is inadmissible from the knowledge proper to the situation. However, Badiou argues that precisely what is lacking in contemporary philosophy is an affirmation of the militant decision that exposes the subject to the universality of truth, an open and radical shift within a situation from which "another politics" could be possible (ibid, 149).

Moving away from Badiou's and Žižek's general critiques of postmodernism we can turn to their engagement with the work of Gilles Deleuze specifically to better

understand their contentions. As Robert Sinnerbrink has argued, Žižek's and Badiou's emphasis on the need for a reengagement with the possibility of singular or concrete universals, especially with regards to the political implications of such universals, is a key fault line by which these two figures trace their separation from the postmodern tradition and its emphasis on difference ("Nomadology or Ideology?" 63). Sinnerbrink identifies Deleuze as a key target of their critique of postmodernism, with Deleuze's philosophy being regarded as merely "*reflecting,* rather than resisting" the violence of the "deterritorialized flows of global capitalism" (ibid, 63). Accordingly, Deleuze's privileging of difference has seen him often aligned with, at best, a complicity with the very repressive forces of capitalism that his work attempts to subvert, and, at worst, the status of the master ideologue of "creative" or "late" capitalism. With his typically humourous tone and provocative flair, Žižek poses this same question regarding the extent to which Deleuzian concepts can truly count as critical resources for the production of moments of resistance to the hegemonic logics of late capitalism. For instance, in his text *Organs without Bodies*, Žižek aims to critique those "aspects of Deleuzianism that, while masquerading as radical chic" ultimately function to "transform" Deleuze into an ideologist for what Žižek refers to as "digital capitalism" (xxi-xxii). Žižek takes as a point of departure the possibility offered by the literary theorist Jean-Jacques Lecercle in his text "The Pedagogy of Philosophy," in which Lecercle imagines a scene in which a Parisian yuppie—who mistakenly purchased Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* on the assumption that the text would serve as a kind of beginner's introduction to philosophical thought—is puzzled by the text's anti-yuppie content (*Organs without Bodies*, 163). *Contra* Lecercle, Žižek inverts the scene in order to pose the possibility that Deleuze and Guattari's oeuvre could function so as to reflect, rather than resist the logic of late or digital-capitalism. Žižek asks, what if

> there is no puzzled look, but enthusiasm, when the yuppie reads about impersonal imitation of affects, about the communication of affective intensities beneath the level of meaning ("Yes, this is how I design my publicities!"), or when he reads about exploding the limits of self-contained subjectivity and directly coupling man to machine ("This reminds me of my son's favourite toy, the action-man that can turn into a car!"), or about the need to reinvent oneself permanently, opening oneself up to a multitude of desires that push us to the limit ("Is this not the aim of the virtual sex video game I am working on now? It is no longer a question of reproducing sexual bodily contact but of exploding the confines of established reality and imagining new, unheard-of intensive modes of sexual pleasures!"). These are,

> effectively, features that justify calling Deleuze the ideologist of late
> capitalism. (ibid, 163)

Such a critique of Deleuzian philosophy cannot encapsulate Badiou's and Žižek's critiques of postmodern philosophy *tout court*, and yet it nevertheless provides us with a sense of what is at stake in their dispute. As John D. Caputo has argued, it is a recurrent trope in Žižek's work—and in Badiou's as well, though Caputo does not mention him explicitly—to find the postmodern affirmation of difference presented as the emergence of "relativistic 'conversation,' [from which] decision dissolves into a pool of undecidability [and] genuine political action into political correctness" (*The Insistence of God*, 154-5). While undecidability has been established as important for Badiou's and Žižek's accounts of the "event" and the "act" respectively, Žižek has spoken pointedly about what he sees as the difference between the "postmodern" sense of undecidability and the kind that he finds and affirms in Badiou's work. Žižek writes:

> Against the deconstructionist and/or postmodern politics of "undecidability"
> and "semblance," Badiou—to paraphrase Saint-Just's well-known comment
> on "happiness as a political factor"—wants to (re) assert *truth as a political
> factor*, this does not mean that he wants to return to the premodern grounding
> of politics in some eternal neutral order of Truth. For Badiou, *Truth itself is a
> theological-political notion*: theological insofar as religious revelation is the
> unavowed paradigm of the Truth-Event; political because Truth is not a state
> to be perceived by means of a neutral intuition, but a matter of (ultimately
> political) engagement. (*The Ticklish Subject*, 215)[3]

The Žižekian trope that Caputo writes of, the reference to postmodern philosophy as the proliferation of effete and hesitant conversations, is here presented as a foil to Badiou's thinking of a militant subjectivity that holds a fidelity to a universal truth *because* of the undecidability of the situation. This is to say that Badiou and Žižek, much like the postmodern philosophers they malign, reject the possibility of arriving at truly universal regulative norms in any situation. However, once the impossibility of such norms has been established, Badiou and Žižek insist upon the possibility of other kinds of concrete or singular universals. In their respective accounts,

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[3] Žižek speaks of religious revelation as the "unavowed" paradigm of the "Truth-Event" because, officially, Badiou designates only four paradigms of the "event," these being: art, love, politics, and mathematics (*Being and Event*, 17). However, Badiou's major work on universality and the politics of militant subjectivity is arguably his work on Saint Paul, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, and, therefore, the extent to which religion remains an "unavowed" philosophical condition in Badiou's work is certainly debatable.

postmodern philosophy is presented as having effectively balked in the face of the challenge of thinking through non-normative universal truths, and has instead merely limited itself to an openness to the undecidability of the particular. Indeed, it is for this reason that Badiou and Žižek claim that the postmodern affirmation of difference and pluralism is closer to being a symptom of late capitalism than a viable form of resistance to it.

The contemporary critical theorist Jodi Dean, a figure deeply influenced by both Žižek and Badiou, provides us a concise summary of just such a condemnation of postmodern philosophy when she argues that

> enthusiasm for diversity, multiplicity, and the agency of consumers actively transforming their lifestyles unites left academics and corporate capital. For many on the academic and typing left assertions of difference, singularity, and the fluidity of modes of becoming are radical. (*Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies,* 9)

On Dean's account, then, what the "postmodern left" see as radical and as potentially counter-hegemonic—i.e., the affirmation of difference—slowly comes to be indistinguishable from the functioning of late capitalism, insofar as the latter embraces difference at all levels. She argues that, since both the ideologues of neoliberalism and the philosophers of postmodernism affirm similar terms— difference, heterogeneity, fluidity and hybridity, etc.—the postmodern left's "point of critique and resistance is lost, subsumed" (ibid, 9). Furthermore, she continues that the postmodern left's putative insistence on destabilizing all forms of knowledge and truth merely mirrors the state (and status) of information in what she calls "communicative capitalism." In a world of "communicative capitalism" in which truth and knowledge are already immensely inhibited by the sheer amount of disinformation that is disseminated throughout the internet—a condition evinced by the existence of 9/11 conspiracy theorists, or "truthers," who claim that the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre towers were an "inside job" performed by the Bush administration—the postmodern left is, in her view, fundamentally incapable of serving as a form of resistance. "Too often what passes for left politics," she argues, "is little more than the denunciation of all possibility of knowledge and truth, as if communicative capitalism was not already implicated in fundamental changes to the conditions of possibility for credibility, changes that activism for 9/11 truth demands that we confront" (*Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies,* 9).

Dean develops this problem further in her use of the notion of "symbolic efficiency" and its decline within the sphere of new-media communication (*Blog Theory*, 5). Dean borrows this notion of "symbolic efficiency" from Žižek—who in turn has adopted and modified the notion from the structuralist and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. As Christopher Johnson clarifies in his text *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Formative Years*, the notion of "symbolic efficiency" or "symbolic efficacy" refers to a measure of the capacity for certain culturally formed ideas—such as the myths that a shaman might retell to a community member—to displace the contingency of existence by introducing a sense of order and cohesion (77). For example, a shaman who can contextualize a painful and potentially traumatic experience such as childbirth within a cosmological story can serve the purpose of binding what could seem like contingent and meaningless struggle to a broader ordered narrative. "Symbolic efficiency" would therefore be a kind of measure for the capacity for this narrative to be binding, and to affect the receiver. In Dean's reading of Žižek's take on this concept, the decline of symbolic efficiency accounts for a communicative condition in which stable identities are unable to emerge and successful transmission of significance is unable to occur (ibid, 5, 77; *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 63-5). The problem with the dissemination of information via blogs, social networking, and other forms of new-media, Dean argues, is that such platforms produce situations where the "message" being conveyed cannot be made symbolically efficient, the supposed significance of the message being open to and threatened by contingency and polysemy (*Blog Theory*, 5). She writes that "blog posts" provide a clear example of this contemporary phenomenon, insofar as it is at times difficult to determine when "a blog or post is ironic and when it's sincere, when it's funny and when it's serious" (ibid, 5). What "communicative capitalism" thus inhibits for Dean is the emergence and evaluation of norms and identities insofar as the difficulty in determining the conventions of reading—"should I read this article as satire and as an exclusive in-joke, or should it be taken at face value?"—leads to a cynical postmodern subject for whom the cycles of fashion and trends replaces the possibility of a ground that "entails bonds of obligation" (ibid, 77). *Contra* the postmodern view that the dominance of essentialist and naturalistic thinking—hence, the failure to affirm difference—depoliticizes life by making contingent conventions appear necessary and grounded, Dean argues that it is precisely the destabilizing, de-essentialist, and anti-foundational character of "communicative capitalism" that

makes the affirmation of difference offered by postmodern philosophy superfluous. Following Dean's account, then, the postmodern tendency to critique the status of truth and knowledge as natural or essential makes the postmodern left incapable of seeing the truth of capitalism as such—i.e., that capitalism already embraces difference, and happily awaits the emergence of new forms of difference.

However, if the heterogeneous undecidability of the situation renders the postmodern attention to the incommensurability of particular language games or singular texts merely a symptom of capitalist deterritorialization, the question remains as to what philosophy can be said to do with regards to the question of radical or "truly" emancipatory politics? That is to say, if the only possible form of resistance to capitalism must be formulated in terms of a militant fidelity to a truth event that is subtracted from the positive knowledge of a given situation—and, as already noted, Badiou stresses that part of a universal truth's singularity is its being caught up in a subject's active involvement or participation—the role that Badiou's and Žižek's philosophies are supposed to play is ambiguous. As Pluth and Hallward have respectively noted, Badiou does not attempt to ground his affirmation of mathematics as ontology, nor his designation of the domains of truth—politics, art, mathematics, love—in anything less than an axiomatic decision that is made aside from even the pretence of a foundational argument (*Badiou: A Philosophy of the New*, 45; *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 312). Seemingly, on the question of the proper political act or on the question of the correct starting point for philosophy, Badiou affirms the primacy of decision, of holding a fidelity to an axiom that cannot be proven by a previous system of knowledge—be it the knowledge of the state to which the truth of the revolution is foreclosed, or the postmodern ambivalence regarding notions of universality and truth. Does this mean that philosophy is beholden to its own truth event in the form of the universal singularity of Badiou's mathematical ontology and his designation of the event of truth? Not according to Badiou, since he explicitly forbids just such a truth event; indeed, Badiou argues that, while the presence of the sophist can tempt the philosopher to declare that truth has been grasped absolutely, so as to "finish with the sophist *once and for all*" to do so would be a mistake since to declare the seizure of truth "once and for all" in philosophy "annuls the chance of truths" (*Infinite Thought*, 126). Indeed, Badiou is careful to make "political philosophy"—the philosophical study of politics as an object—distinct from his procedure of "metapolitics," that is to

say, a philosophy that "carries a trace of a political condition which is neither an object nor what requires production in thought, but only a contemporaneity that produces philosophical *effects*" (*Metapolitics*, 55).

Given, then, that on Badiou's account, a political truth event is conditioned by its radical incommensurability with a given situation and its lived embodiment in a subject, what can philosophy offer other than the service of policing the boundary that separates the event from the event's semblance? Of course Badiou cannot tell us where to look for an event, or what to do to properly prepare ourselves for its potential eruption. However, he does state that one can attempt to prepare themselves for the coming of an event by "remaining faithful to a past event" and by engaging in "criticism of the established order" (*Philosophy and the Event*, 13). The role of philosophy, then, appears to be little more than a kind of cheerleader for the revolution, a reminder that their have been "events" in the past, that they will arise in the future, and that there are no events in our current time. Indeed, since both Badiou and Žižek are adamant that "true" political resistance can only emerge in the form of a radical break with a given situation, it is unsurprising that some have criticized them for having seemingly little to contribute to the discussion of present political struggle. As Ernesto Laclau has noted, what it would mean to overcome capitalism in the manner that Žižek has written of is deeply ambiguous:

> I understand what Marx meant by overcoming the capitalist regime, because he made it quite explicit several times. I also understand what Lenin or Trotsky meant for the same reason. But in the work of Žižek that expression means nothing – unless he has a secret strategic plan of which he is very careful not to inform anybody. ("Structure, History and the Political," 206)

It is just this kind of ambiguity in Žižek's texts that leaves him open to the charge of being merely a polemicist and devil's advocate—a contrarian who has no real position but who instead prefers to lash out at all else. Such a view is very much espoused by the contemporary American academic Geoffrey Galt Harpham, who, in his article "Doing the Impossible: Slavoj Žižek and the End of Knowledge," accuses Žižek of being a "*symptom* of the academic west," and one whose popularity and influence comes from an inability of many in the West to "suspend both our amusement and our amazement" in encountering the Slovenian philosopher's work (485). Harpham's principal problem with Žižek's work is that it appears to simply ignore "the standard format of argumentation," which Harpham lays out as involving

adducing evidence, drawing inferences, proposing counterarguments, probing provisional conclusions in a spirit of skeptical inquiry, and eliminating contradictions, all of which lead towards a conclusion, a summative statement whose various elements have passed through the fires of rigorous and disinterested testing. This process functions as the form of fairness, an agreement to display the means by which a conclusion is achieved in order to prevent the mere reiteration of prejudice or the interference of desire. (ibid, 455)

Finding in Žižek's writing seemingly no respect for such conventions, Harpham sees in it instead a "stream of nonconsecutive units arranged in arbitrary sequences that solicit a sporadic and discontinuous attention," which Harpham diagnoses as revealing that Žižek simply does not "believe that books should be *about* something" (ibid, 455). Žižek's texts are certainly unusual and do not adhere to the conventions of most humanities writing to the extent that, as Harpham states, they are made of seemingly endless readings and re-readings of major philosophical figures—it is common enough to find engagements with Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida, and Badiou in a single one of his books, with several of these figures appearing at once in the same chapter—alongside a consistent reference to jokes, popular culture, and contemporary events. Moreover, Žižek's refusal to present hypotheses or conventional arguments arguably creates the impression of an "endless middle" that is "achieved by reducing the conventional middle to almost zero" (ibid, 455). Thus, for Harpham, a

typical Žižekian unit of discourse—a wittily-titled passage of between five and fifteen pages—begins abruptly with the kind of confident assertion commonly associated with the conclusion; there is no phase of doubt, no pretense of unprejudiced inquiry, only a series of demonstrations, exemplifications, and restatements. Informed throughout by the spirit of conclusion, these units do not, in themselves, conclude, but simply gutter out at the end, like a sparkler; no sense of fairness attends the terminus and no invitation to further work by others is implied. (ibid, 455-6)

Interestingly, Žižek rightly detects in Harpham's article an accusation of adhering to the very same postmodern thought that he has presented himself as rejecting ("Critical Response I—A Symptom of What?" 496). Žižek argues that Harpham presents him as the "caricatured postmodern denier of rationality," which we can assume means someone who resists the dominance of scientific reason and its assertion of the necessity of hypothesis and falsification; who avoids the question of necessity in favour of contingency; and who affirms difference to the point of making absolutely stable reading positions impossible. Žižek protests that he absolutely cannot be a

postmodern philosopher, since in several of his works he has in fact defended "the claims of science against the postmodern dismissal of science as just another historically conditioned narrative or symbolic fiction" (ibid, 496). The question that this line of defense raises, however, is where are we to find examples of postmodern thinkers who have reduced science to "just another" discourse? Which postmodern thinker—that is to say, a thinker who affirms the need to critique all forms of essentialism and naturalism and who advocates an affirmation of difference—argues that science is simply one "narrative" or "symbolic fiction" amongst others, and, accordingly, has no singularity or specificity to it and does not deserve a special place in our engagement with the problems of modernity and postmodernity? While there is certainly a strong argument to be made that the thinkers who inspire postmodern thought—such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Husserl, amongst others—all share a reservation about the dangers of rationalism and scientism, and, moreover, that the key figures often associated with postmodern thought such as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard seek to interrogate the specific discursive operations of scientific reason, the notion that postmodernism treats science as merely one narrative or discourse amongst others—rather than as a particularly powerful and potentially dangerous discourse that needs to be explored in its singularity—is asserted here by Žižek without example.

Nevertheless, Žižek is not interested in such "caricatures" and instead, in a perhaps unsurprising move, accuses Harpham of being the true postmodernist out of the two. Žižek states that he finds in Harpham's critique a typically "postmodern"

> avoidance of firm and straight positions. Instead of a clear conclusion, a typical postmodern essay ends with a putative rhetorical question, along the lines of, May we then, perhaps, suggest a possibility that . . . —a case of arrogance masked as false modesty if ever there was one. (ibid, 487)

At this point one could be forgiven for taking "postmodern," in the context of this debate, to be a synonym for the characteristics of each figure's work that the other dislikes and finds contemptible or dangerous. For Harpham, Žižek represents a kind of postmodern irrationalism that is dangerous for the humanities, whereas, for Žižek, Harpham is an embodiment of a kind of postmodern effeteness—merely looking to contribute to discussion and ultimately unwilling to affirm "true" change. For Žižek, Harpham reads his work as dangerous, and yet finds a use-value in his work insofar as it helps Harpham to diagnose what is "wrong" with postmodern thought. On Žižek's

account, this move is typical of a postmodern arrogance that is expressed through a lack both of textual urgency and of resoluteness. What is interesting about this exchange, and perhaps a little comical, is the mutual projection of the pejorative "postmodernism" onto the other—albeit for quite different reasons. Harpham can find only a series of interesting non-sequiturs in Žižek's work, and, for this reason, dismisses him as being complicit with a general shift in the humanities towards a kind of unstable anti-knowledge that can serve no use except perhaps as a form of amusement. For Žižek, on the other hand, Harpham is much closer to the figure of the "postmodern thinker" due to his desire simply to contribute to an ongoing discussion and affirm the usefulness of different positions, regardless of their lack of truth content.

It would be very easy to write off such a debate as being cursed by a kind of academic resentment, insofar as the discourse of both Žižek and Harpham appears to lack a willingness to engage the other as *other*—to truly take the other as a rival that one is bound to in contestation, as opposed to taking the other as defective or wrong. Undoubtedly there is a sense in which such a critical resentment hinders the pair from engaging more productively with the work of the other and suppresses the chance for a dialogue—even an agonistic one—to take place. However, it is interesting that in an article that so firmly and directly critiques his work, Žižek detects the postmodern tendency of something like the uncertainty—or in Žižek's language the "false modesty"—that we might associate with a term like "perhaps." Žižek states that, when you confront a postmodernist—presumably "like" Harpham—you can never get a straight or direct answer, but instead something more akin to:

> "It is the wrong question to ask! It is not simply a matter of believing or not, but, rather, a matter of certain radical experience, of the ability to open oneself to certain unheard-of dimensions, of the way our openness to radical Otherness allows us to adopt a specific ethical stance, to participate in certain unique social practices, to experience a shattering form of enjoyment." Against this, one should insist more than ever that the vulgar question "Do you *really believe* or not?" *matters*—perhaps more than ever. ("Critical Response I—A Symptom of What?" 487)

For Žižek, Harpham's insistence on what we could refer to as a kind of postmodern disposition of "perhaps" is what makes his work so ineffectual in the midst of what he sees as the contemporary necessity of conviction. However, do we really see evidence of this postmodern openness in Harpham's work? Do we find a suspension of static

beliefs regarding the function of the work of writing in the humanities, or do we not find an uncompromising and rather direct castigation of Žižek for having failed to meet a set of expectations regarding research in the humanities—i.e., that one will necessarily introduce a hypothesis, analyze evidence, entertain counterfactuals, etc.?

So, the question to pose in light of Žižek's apparent condemnation of the postmodern affirmation of difference and his insistence on the necessity of decisiveness concerns what it would mean to read Žižek's work in the spirit of "perhaps"—that is to say, to read Žižek divergently and without a sense of certainty, something that Harpham clearly struggles to do. Such a reading would arguably involve a rejection of the false choice between either affirming Žižek's work as being a stringent critique of everything toothless and vapid about postmodern thought—as figures like Jodi Dean at times seem to do—or rejecting Žižek's work on the grounds that it is simply incoherent and prone to contradiction. In avoiding such a false choice, in learning to say "perhaps" to Žižek's work, rather than either championing it outright or simply reading it from the position of a self-righteous critical imperative, we can gesture towards the possibility of grasping Žižek's work precisely as a form of the resistant postmodern affirmation of difference that he seems to reject. Indeed, the first obstacle to such a reading would appear to be the numerous condemnations Žižek provides of postmodern thought. As the contemporary political philosopher Bruno Bosteels has argued in *The Actuality of Communism*, time and time again in Žižek's work we find instances of "aggressive stabs" being made against "standard arguments" for multiculturalism, attacks on what he sees as "deconstructionist misunderstandings of Hegel and Lacan"—the two theoretical figures that Žižek draws on most frequently—and what seems like a sheer disdain for the conventions of cultural studies (167-70). "Perhaps," Bosteels writes, sympathetic readers of Žižek have so far failed to engage with these "cheap potshots at the eclectic poststructuralist-deconstructionist-respect-for-the-other-multiculturalist consensus of today" beyond taking a "perverse pleasure in them" (ibid, 167). This is quite a risky "perhaps" for Bosteels to pursue, not only because there are indeed many who take these "cheap potshots" all too literally, but, more so, because in suspending the comfortable convention of reading theoretical texts as addressing something external—something "out there" that the text chooses to comment on and help clarify—Bosteels argues that, perhaps, the "typical postmodernist" that Žižek rails

against is Žižek himself (ibid, 167-8). While this claim might be dismissed as merely recycling a "deconstructive formula" that presents itself as embodying an immense "openness" to Žižek's works, and as searching for the possibility of an "other" Žižek at work in those writings, the claim is nevertheless not without some textual support. Bosteels states that in several endnotes to his texts Žižek draws our attention to an immanent project of self-criticism (ibid, 170). Bosteels highlights a passage from the end of Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject*, where he writes that "at least concerning cultural studies, I speak here not from the condescending position of a critic assuming the safe position of an external observer, but as someone who has participated in cultural studies—I, as it were, 'include myself out'…" (ibid, 170; *The Ticklish Subject*, 396). Moreover, Bosteels points to Žižek's *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* where Žižek states that his turn towards popular culture as a means of explaining Lacanian psychoanalytic principles ultimately serves the purpose of making such principles as clear as possible so that even an idiot could understand them (ibid, 170; *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 175). But who is this idiot if not simply a rhetorical straw man used to prop up Žižek's arguments? Žižek clarifies this point by stating that, "the idiot for whom I endeavour to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is ultimately myself" (ibid, 170; *Metastases of Enjoyment*, 175).

Such an articulation of the text's true referent as being the writer or the reader who engages the text, rather than as being some "external" object that the text views itself as being able to faithfully represent and therefore assess and evaluate, shows the potential for Žižek's works to be read both in a divergent spirit and as an aid to learning to say "perhaps." While we conventionally view texts—especially philosophical texts—as an authoritative foundation from which we might build certainty and make decisions, Žižek's works can be read as a site for displacing necessity, certainty, and authority and affirming the otherwise possible in all things. Indeed, Žižek seems, at times, to speak directly towards such a possibility. In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Žižek speaks to the notions of "digital," "cyber," or "communicative" capitalism that concern many contemporary theorists—such as Jodi Dean—as being potential hindrances to our capacity to think critically and resistantly. He states that in contemporary society,

> it is obvious that we are in the midst of a process in which a new constellation of productive forces and relations of productions is taking shape; however, the terms we use to designate this emerging New ('postindustrial society',

'information society', etc.) are not yet true *concepts.* Like the notion of 'totalitarianism', they are theoretical *stopgaps*: instead of enabling us to think the historical reality they designate, they relieve us of the duty to think - or even actively *prevent* us from thinking. The standard retort of postmodern trendsetters, from Alvin Toffler to Jean Baudrillard, is: we cannot think this New because we remain stuck in the old industrial paradigm. Against this cliché, one is tempted to assert that the exact *opposite* is true: what if all these attempts to *leave behind,* to erase from the picture, material production by conceptualizing the current mutation as the shift from production to information ignore the difficulty of thinking how this mutation affects *the structure* of *collective production itself?* In other words, what if the true task is precisely to conceive of the emerging New in the terms of collective material production? (*Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* 138)

Here, rather than speaking of what we could refer to as "late capitalism" in terms of a absolutely new paradigm that is irreducible to previous conceptions, Žižek argues that such a view hinders our capacity to think critically at all. There is, however, an ambiguity at play in Žižek's argument, an ambiguity that can be seized upon—in the spirit of "perhaps"—or can be simply overlooked. We could take Žižek here to imply that there *is* a true historical reality of material production that is simply overlooked in its true ontological status when we turn to theoretical "stopgaps" such as "information society." In this reading, Žižek's advice would appear to be for us simply to reject these new fangled discourses on the "real" and get back to the good old fashioned real itself—i.e., "collective material production." However, read in the spirit of "perhaps," what if the "true" task according to Žižek is not to produce a "brand new" representation of external reality that displaces previous conceptions, but is instead to use the "emerging New" as a means of disrupting, modifying, and interrupting the present understanding of "collective material production"—that is, to conceive of one in terms of the other, as opposed to simply viewing one notion as replacing the other.

In order to locate such a non-representational affirmation of difference in Žižek's work, however, we would have to learn to read a "perhaps" alongside statements like "one is tempted to assert that the exact *opposite* is true," to place the emphasis on "tempted" and not on "true." Indeed, in locating a certain spirit of "perhaps" in Žižek's work we can interpret his critiques of "postmodern thought"— with its "standard," "typical," and "clichéd" affirmation of difference—as speaking not of a particular figure or an intellectual tradition that Žižek seeks to exclude himself from, but rather as a tradition that Žižek situates himself within or amongst. In this lineage, however, Žižek occupies or produces a disruptive gap or fissure which

functions to trouble not postmodern thought itself so much as a certain way of *reading* postmodern texts. This is to say that, while postmodern thought has positioned itself against any metaphysical commitment to an "external real" that is absolutely anterior to the text, discourse, or language-game, the tempting possibility of reading such texts as making claims about the ontological structure of an external real always remains. Therefore, rather than reading Žižek's texts as opposed to the postmodern affirmation of difference, we might assess those works, instead, as a further means of affirming the postmodern affirmation of difference. Indeed, it is interesting on reflection to take up Dean's development of the decline and failure of "symbolic efficiency" in relation to Žižek's work, insofar as Žižek is a figure whose books are so replete with jokes, ironic assertions, polemic outbursts, and counter-intuitive reversals of concepts and conventional logic that the process of reading them is at times akin to a perpetual double take. If "communicative capitalism" impedes the formation of a subjective position from which a sense of obligation to fight against capitalist tyranny and postmodernist inanity can be affirmed, why is it that Žižek's writing—whose style makes it difficult to determine when it "is ironic and when it's sincere, when it's funny and when it's serious," to borrow Dean's formulation about blogging (*Blog Theory*, 5)—is able to provide such a sense of obligation? Similarly, while Žižek accuses Deleuze of being an ideologue of late capitalism, the perpetual middle that Harpham detects in Žižek's work is in a certain perverse way rhizomatic, insofar as its lack of clear beginning and end produces what we could call, *pace* Harpham, a "perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other way, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 27).

Of course, many do not share Žižek's sense of the compossiblity of laughter, humour, and questions of politics. *Contra* Žižek, Philip Mirowski, whose excellent book *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go To Waste* shares Žižek's sense of urgency regarding the disaster of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, argues that laughter and jokes are in fact the last thing we need in such a time of crisis:

> bitter comic mordancy can be fun; but a nagging voice whispers: isn't it just *too easy* to make fun of the Invisible Hand? Isn't there something *lazy* about Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart? Is the right response to the nightmare of crisis fatigue to laugh it off? (9).

How would Žižek respond to the idea that there is simply a correct set of ways to respond to political challenges, and that laughter and humour are "easy" and "lazy" responses to the problems of global capitalism? Indeed, Ola Sigurdson argues in her article "Emancipation as a Matter of Style: Humour and Eschatology in Eagleton and Žižek," that there is always already something political and resistant going on in Žižek's texts due to their emphasis on the comedic as a form of writing (236). Furthermore, the emphasis on the comic disrupts the traditional hierarchies that subordinate certain subject matters below others. One of the things that has made Žižek famous is his capacity to make topics as varied as the crisis of late capitalism, the links between Hegel and Lacan, the films of Hitchcock, and alternative interpretations of the incarnation of Christ seem engaging and mutually dependent. Perhaps there are few thinkers who have done as much work as Žižek to encourage people to read diversely, since to parse even a margin of one of his books involves engaging—at least in an introductory way—with Marxism, psychoanalysis, philosophy, theology, contemporary politics, modern art, and cinema amongst other areas of knowledge. The effect that this may have on the reader is not just to find value in a host of diverse subjects, but also to appreciate the value of sharing jokes and laughter, of engaging others in dialogues that are meaningful, not because of an institutional injunction to find them meaningful or to take them seriously, but because they "mean" in the sense of having a consequence.

But what of Badiou? Surely the thinking of this philosophical militant, the great affirmer of truth, universality, and the primacy of mathematics as ontology cannot be made commensurable with a postmodern openness to difference? Despite his own rejections of postmodern thought, Badiou's work has also drawn criticisms for failing to respect the proper boundaries between disciplines and for engaging in illegitimate and incomprehensible uses of mathematics, and therefore has itself been criticized along the same lines as those applied to postmodern thought. For example, Roger Scruton claims that in Badiou's work "the jargon of set theory is waved like a magician's wand, to give authority to bursts of all but unintelligible metaphysics" ("A Nothing Would Do As Well," 8). In a similar vein, the perhaps anti-postmodernists *par excellence* Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont have argued that Badiou's leaps between formal problems within mathematics and questions of politics are at best "arbitrary" and at worst akin to the "openly ridiculous" (*Fashionable Nonsense*, 180).

The pair argues further that Badiou's mixture of "politics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and set theory" results in abrupt jumps between theoretical domains that often gives the impression that "a few paragraphs were inadvertently omitted" in the presentation of his arguments (ibid, 180-1). Such a claim that there is something fundamentally illegitimate in Badiou's shifting from mathematical formalism to political events of truth are not hard to find, but, for Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, the use of formal mathematical notions in the development of political thought poses the serious risk of "deliberately obscur[ing] the basic ontological difference that made the modern discovery of infinity such a revolutionary event in human thought" ("Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology," 598). That is to say, on the Nirenbergs' account, the use of formal concepts from set theory in the thought of historical political events—such as the French revolution—can only serve to rob modern mathematics of its specific intellectual acuity (ibid, 598). What is most interesting about these criticisms, then, is not their unraveling of Badiou's work as mere "fashionable nonsense," but, instead, their capacity to reveal that work's unavowed and postmodern openness to a plurality of forms of thought. Indeed, Badiou gestures towards such an openness in the preface to *Being and Event* when he argues that against the dominant traditions of phenomenology and Anglo-American analytic philosophy, he will look to both major poetic figures such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Samuel Beckett and major mathematical figures such as Georg Cantor and Alexander Grothendieck in order to "break with the horrific academic destiny of specialization" and to renew "the tie to the absolute opening without which philosophy is nothing" (xiv).

It would of course be misguided to assert that this affirmation of philosophy's connection to "the absolute opening" in some way reveals Badiou's secret status as a postmodern philosopher, since, as we have discussed (see Introduction), his contentions regarding postmodern philosophy centre on the latter's supposed rejection of a strong affirmation of truth, universality, and the subject. However, as with Harpham's criticisms of Žižek, the argument put forward by Badiou's detractors— that there is something illegitimate and problematic in his interlacing of conventionally separated domains—helps to reveal the extent to which Badiou begins by embracing a plurality of discourses. We can take Badiou's use of mathematics in producing a new ontology as an example of such a potential pluralism. As Talia

Morag has indicated with regards to Badiou's thesis that "mathematics *is* ontology," at no point in *Being and Event* does Badiou "attest to his motivation for this thesis" and "neither does he justify it" ("Doing Without Ontology," 133). Such an absence of justification could be read as paradigmatic of the "excess" of postmodern philosophy, insofar as the latter is conventionally charged with simply affirming all discourses as being equal—"why not begin with mathematics since it is as useful as anything else!" But, against such a reading, Morag points out that Badiou attempts to attend to the consequences of making the decision to begin with mathematics rather than attempting to simply justify this decision in advance, and *therein* to "ground" the "necessity" of this decision (ibid, 133). Accordingly, with this fact in mind, how can we begin to think about the consequences of Badiou's decision that mathematics is ontology, and how do these consequences relate to Badiou's refutation of postmodern philosophy?

One of the clearest consequences of Badiou's privileging of mathematics is that it raises the question of the place of mathematics and number more generally within Western thought. Today everyone "knows" precisely what numbers are since they appear to be for everything, or as Badiou puts it, today "what counts—in the sense of what is valued—is what is counted" (*Number and Numbers*, 2). Especially in the domain of democratic politics, Badiou contends, the procedure of the count, of counting and recounting voter's opinions, ages, births, deaths, employment and unemployment etc., produces a situation wherein the dominance of mathematics goes on largely unquestioned (ibid, 1-2). Moreover, Badiou points out the extent to which numbers have come to inform our sense of self—from one's age to their mass to their endowments, fiscal or otherwise—and the extent to which they dominate the "human sciences," producing disciplines that function as webs of "blindly tested numerical correlations" (ibid, 2). What is troubling about this state of affairs, on Badiou's account, is not that it leads to a discordance between humanity and its immediate "nature," but, instead, that the dominance of number and "the count" are in tandem with a general lack of interest in the question of what numbers *are*. As Badiou states, while numbers certainly play an immense role in our sense of the world and our sense of ourselves, "we don't know what a number is so we don't know what we are" (ibid, 3). Accordingly, Badiou argues that the dominance of number, coupled with a general

ignorance regarding the question of the being of number, is ultimately perilous for modern humanity.

However, surely philosophy provides us with a better state of affairs, a more nuanced and careful consideration of number and the effect that it has on our lives? Against such optimism Badiou argues that nothing could be further from the truth and that an almost willed ignorance concerning mathematics pervades philosophy. While he does name philosophers who have engaged with mathematical questions rigorously—such as Plato, Leibniz, and Husserl—Badiou argues that philosophy's relationship to mathematics is in a dire state of affairs. He contends that

> philosophers are able to understand a fragment by Anaximander, an elegy by Rilke, a seminar on the Real by Lacan, but not the 2,500 year-old proof that there are an infinity of prime numbers. This is an unacceptable, anti-philosophical state of affairs. ("Mathematics and Philosophy," 19)

Faced with the difficulty of mathematical problems the "philosophical demagogue," according to Badiou, will either "ignore mathematics all together" or "act is if the most primitive rudiments are enough" (ibid, 18). For Badiou, the "disjunction between mathematics and philosophy" is an indication of the dominance of the Romantic tradition within contemporary philosophy ("Philosophy and Mathematics," 26). Badiou indicates that our time is the inverse of Plato's own, insofar as the "matheme" has been banished from philosophy and the poem granted a central place (ibid, 27). However, while it certainly seems true that poetry plays a more substantial role than mathematics in the works of philosophers associated with postmodernism, is it really true to say that mathematics has been spurned by philosophy in favour of poetry? Indeed, couldn't one point to the discipline of the philosophy of mathematics itself as an obvious refutation of Badiou's thesis? That is to say, insofar as there exists an entire sub-discipline dedicated to the philosophical study of mathematics, how can Badiou claim that there is a disjunction between philosophy and mathematics? The answer to this question lies in Badiou's attitude toward that sub-discipline, which he summarizes as being "a morose area of specialization for cobwebbed epistemologists" (ibid, 27).

What this quote suggests is that Badiou's target is not the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy—a tradition that contains a host of figures interested in mathematical concerns including, but certainly not limited to, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, and Hilary Putnam—nor the philosophy of mathematics, but

instead the broader postmodern tradition. Within the continental tradition, especially those figures influenced by Heidegger, the study of literature, art and poetry is not taken to be a secondary or specialist area of study that must be kept distinct from other philosophical concerns such as ethics or politics. However, following Badiou's account, mathematics has not been afforded the same pride of place in the work of contemporary philosophy—i.e., postmodern philosophy. In a similar vein, John D. Caputo has commented, for thinkers interested in the continental tradition there is the risk of reproducing a certain Kantian gesture of denying the claims of the natural sciences to make room for "what we are doing back in the 'humanities center,' in 'philosophy' and 'theology' and 'literature'" (*The Insistence of God*, 168). Caputo's concerns echo those of Ray Brassier who has also argued that the critique of scientism or of scientific reductionism that can be found in the phenomenological tradition is itself at risk of producing a reductive and dismissive account of science and mathematics, subordinating these modes of thought to the supposed primacy of phenomenological investigation (*Nihil Unbound*, 7-8). Indeed, for Badiou much of the blame lies with Heidegger who, despite his major contribution to philosophy—which Badiou fully acknowledges—designated modern science as a nihilistic force of calculation and manipulation (*Being and Event*, 9). Badiou's work, by contrast, rather than attempting to displace the poem and suture philosophy to mathematics, appears to invoke a spirit of pluralism that places mathematics alongside politics, love, and poetry as philosophy's conditions. Instead of attempting to ground thought in an apodictic mathematical certainty, Badiou points to mathematics as a mode of thought that is historical, that is to say dynamic, and important for our thinking of various domains and concerns—whether they are ethical, political, aesthetic or otherwise.

Consequently, while both Badiou and Žižek attack postmodern philosophy as a malign tradition that poses a threat to philosophical thought as such, both figures embrace key tenets of postmodern philosophy such as the embrace of heterogeneous modes of thought and an affirmation of philosophical pluralism. Both figures certainly aim to disrupt and problematize the way we go about reading philosophical texts—especially those of the postmodern tradition—but such critiques of the conventional or dogmatic manner of engaging with philosophy are inseparable from the tradition of philosophy itself. For this reason, Badiou's and Žižek's work can be read so as to emphasize a postmodern affirmation of difference and plurality by

opening up philosophical thought to underprivileged traditions and their respective concepts. As we have seen, rather than interpreting Badiou's and Žižek's work as offering us an incentive to affirm decisiveness and militancy *against* the purportedly insufficient concepts and politics of postmodern pluralism, we can see their work as offering us an incentive to rigorously and innovatively engage across disciplines, finding the political in the mathematical or the humorous, for example. Indeed, in such a reading of Badiou and Žižek, a reading of these figures against themselves so to speak, we find the need for political decisiveness is itself somewhat grounded in a seemingly postmodern affirmation of difference—of the difference that mathematics, psychoanalysis, and laughter can make to our thinking of politics. However, to reach this finding of a possible alliance between Badiou's and Žižek's respective work and the postmodern affirmation of difference, we have had to suspend acceptance of their obstinate rejection of postmodern thought. For this reason, we return in the following chapter to Badiou's and Žižek's critiques of postmodernism, and in particular their respective association of the need for political decision with a general narrative of crisis. By turning to Heidegger's discussion of modernity, a discussion that is deeply influential for both Badiou and Žižek—even as they criticize it in turn—as a means of exploring the connection between the logic of decisiveness and the logic of crisis, we may put ourselves in a better position to consider the possibility of alternatives to such logics.

Chapter Two:
Philosophies of Crisis

In the previous chapter we outlined the possibility of reading Badiou and Žižek against their rejection of postmodern philosophy and as allies of postmodern thought, as figures whose works can be read as embracing intellectual pluralism and an openness to difference. Given this potential compossiblity between their respective works and the works of postmodern philosophy more broadly, the question remains as to how we should interpret their caustic attacks on the postmodern tradition. In this chapter we explore the parallels between Badiou's and Žižek's critiques of postmodern philosophy and the Heideggerian interpretation of modernity as a historical period of crisis—and one that extends into the contemporary "postmodern world"—in which "crisis" pertains to the absence of a serious rival to the logics of rationalism, humanism, and consumerism. To refer to a narrative of crisis is to highlight a certain philosophical approach to thinking through the status of modernity, and in this chapter we draw out the implications of such a narrative. While the philosophical call for decisiveness in relation to the problem of the "crisis" of modernity arguably emerges earlier than Heidegger, in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche—such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—and Edmund Husserl—*The Crisis of the European Sciences*—Heidegger's engagement with this "crisis" is more useful for our purposes insofar as Badiou and Žižek engage with it more directly. In providing a critical account of Heidegger's understanding of modernity as the time of "crisis," and its influence on Badiou and Žižek, the aim here is not to argue for or against a "correct" conception of modernity, but instead to explore the consequences that follow from the characterization of the modern world as demanding a decisive philosophical response. In critically engaging with these consequences, therefore, we might then be better equipped to approach the possibility of other forms of thought that can underpin the thinking of politics alongside forms of thought that are irreducible to the philosophical logic of crisis.

Heidegger's writing, and his attempt to reawaken the philosophical engagement with the question of the meaning of Being, has produced an account of the history of metaphysics that is articulated in terms of distinct stages, or "epochs." This discussion of the various "epochs" of metaphysics should not be misinterpreted as being merely a retrospective carving up of various stages of the history of thought, nor should it be confused with the development of a continuous teleology. To be sure, Heidegger, like Hegel, emphasizes the "epochal character" of metaphysics—the notion that metaphysics develops through a series of stages or epochs that are internally coherent—although he differs from Hegel in seeing that coherence as being defined in terms of that epoch's answer to the question of what it means for something to "be," rather than of the epochal nature of Spirit. However, in the course of characterizing this "epochality" Heidegger also attends to that term's etymological root in the Greek word *epoché*. *Epoché*, which is a Greek term often translated as "cessation," was first used in a philosophical sense by the ancient Greek Skeptics to denote a kind of intellectual "standstill" or "suspension" that was necessitated when the thinker was faced with a philosophical impasse that was deemed to be ultimately "undecidable" (*Introduction to Phenomenology*, 148-9). On this basis, then, the metaphysical "epoch" does not simply characterize a particular period of time, but owes its identity to the way in which the question of the meaning of Being is "suspended" or "bracketed off," such that the being of beings is determined in a specific way, and beings are thereby given their particular historical character. For Heidegger, Being is ultimately irreducible to any given being or to the totality of beings, or even to the sate of existing as such. Consequently, the question "what is meaning?" or "what is the nature of that which is truly meaningful, highest, most important?" which Heidegger views as gaining an answer in each distinct historical epoch, can be answered only by way of a forgetting of the prior question of what *is* means. This forgetting is the bracketing or suspension of the question of the meaning of Being that grants the historical determination of the meaning of beings. As Gianni Vattimo puts it:

> Heidegger's *epoché* is the character by which Being reveals and conceals itself simultaneously in the appearing of beings, that is, things and persons that inhabit the world. On the other hand, Being as such withdraws precisely so that beings can appear, subsisting in some way in the horizon it has itself instituted. (*Art's Claim to Truth*, 14)

For Heidegger then, the question of Being, and the attempt to raise this question in a manner unencumbered by a metaphysical tradition that Heidegger tried, perhaps in vain, to extricate himself from, leads to the question of the heterogeneous modes in which Being reveals itself through beings—i.e. through its historical and epochal character. Therefore, within Heidegger's philosophical engagement with these aforementioned questions, a "history of Being" is developed that charts the course of Western Metaphysics, insofar as the latter attempts to capture the essence of beings or entities through a host of metaphysical concepts. As Heidegger states, speaking of the historical and epochal character of Being:

> There is Being only in this or that particular historic character: φύσις [*Physis*], λόγος [*Logos*], ἕν [*Hen* or one], ἰδέα [*Idea*], ἐνέργεια [*Energeia*], Substantiality, Objectivity, Subjectivity, the Will, the Will to Power, the Will to Will. (*Identity and Difference*, 66)

However, Heidegger does not discuss these epochal formations as emerging exclusively out of human thought, planning, or action, nor does he view their emergence in terms of a preordained teleological movement of history. Instead, the metaphysical epochs are further articulated by what Heidegger calls the "sending" and "destining" of Being. These terms—translations of the closely related German words "*schicken*" (sending) and "*Geschick*" (destiny), respectively—are utilized by Heidegger in *The Principle of Reason* in order to provide what he sees as a rigorous account of the historical and epochal emergence of beings, one which acts further to critique the "subjectivism" and "anthropocentrism" that Heidegger saw as emblematic of the nihilism of the modern technological epoch (61). He argued further that the conventional understanding of fate is that of something "determined and imposed," and it is against this notion of fate as inevitability that Heidegger develops the connection between *schicken* and *Geschick* (ibid, 61). Heidegger approaches human understanding in a way that diverges significantly from the metaphysical tradition, insofar as the "understanding" of individual entities is discussed as being a response to the broader history of Being, over the course of which what beings *are* comes to be revealed in a dynamic way. This revealing of beings as belonging to a particular historical epoch should not be confused with a mere subjective projection, however, and is instead something that, whilst being received or affirmed by humanity is nonetheless "sent" from Being. As Lee Braver argues, such a discussion of human understanding as arising out of a response to the "sending" of Being presents an

interesting and unusual critique of the conventional way in which the modern world is interpreted—i.e., humanistically—insofar as human agency is displaced from its conventionally foundational position (*Groundless Grounds*, 146-7). Rather than being mystical and vague, Braver states that Heidegger's discussion of our understanding of things as being primarily responsive and receptive as opposed to active and autonomous, provides a far more rigorous account of our everyday engagement with the world than we might ordinarily assume. Braver illustrates this point by way of discussing this notion of receptivity with regards to our simple everyday choices:

> I don't choose chocolate ice cream over vanilla by weighing their pros and cons with solemn neutrality. Chocolate draws me toward it, seduces me and entices me with its dark rich yumminess, whereas vanilla is just vanilla, withdrawing from the primal scene of flavour selection as not requiring consideration. (ibid, 149-50)

While the scene depicted is quaintly humorous given the odd juxtaposition of Heidegger's lugubriousness and the scene's light-hearted nature, Braver nevertheless strikes at the heart of the phenomenological character of Heidegger's discussion of "sending." *Contra* the commonsense of our own time, in which we take it for granted that human agency and rationality are the primary forces that shape the world, phenomenological investigation—i.e., an investigation into the way things show themselves to be—reveals a world in which we respond to what offers itself up to us, and the character particular to that offering, as opposed to one in which our lives are solely dependent on human value and will. Against our common understanding of things, Heidegger's thought suggests the importance and interconnectedness of response and responsibility. We do not really control the world, no matter how much we tell ourselves this, but are instead in the position of having been "thrown" into the world, and therefore can only respond to things as they happen to appear to us. Yet, despite the associations of "responding" and "receiving" with a certain notion of passivity, Heidegger's account of the "sending" of Being is never divorced from the problem of responsibility, and of the need to face up to the real weight of the burdens that life presents us.

Notwithstanding the levity of Braver's illustration of the responsive nature of human understanding, Heidegger's discussion of the "sending" of Being resides within a solemn engagement with the broader thinking of the Western tradition as opposed to the picaresque scene of buying ice cream. Indeed, it is the tonal disparity that makes Braver's scene so amusing. Heidegger's development of the receptive and

responsive nature of our comportment does not appear to be primarily an attempt to provide an "accurate" account of everydayness—even if this occurs as a by-product—as, instead, Heidegger's writings gesture towards much graver and loftier scenarios. Across Heidegger's later writings, modern humanity's failure to come to terms with the hubris, and not just the erroneousness, of approaching the world anthropocentrically is depicted as an immense threat or crisis that must be faced squarely and decisively ("The Question Concerning Technology," 33-4). Such a sense of possible failure on humanity's part might raise the issue of agency and will, and provoke the question of how an approach to thinking humanity that rejects the primacy of voluntarism can approach the problem of crisis in this way. But it is exactly this sense of a tension between fate, or what is determined, and responsibility, or what must be decided and affirmed, that is central to Heidegger's discussion of "destining." Reiner Schürmann articulates this tension by way of developing the connections between the terms "commit," "emit," and "transmit" (*Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 270). Schürmann states that, "to be 'destined' or bound for a particular place is to have committed oneself to it. To commit, emit, transmit, all imply a sending, *schicken*" (ibid, 270). The destining of Being then can be understood in terms of a response to what is being sent to us from out of Being that necessitates taking responsibility for our response. In order for us to be able to "commit" to a particular understanding, it must first have been sent to us. Accordingly, rather than the destiny of humanity being either an apocryphal myth or something entirely preordained and proven—in the manner of an empirical fact—the destining that emerges from out of Being appears to be the collaborative response that is made in the face of what is sent or transmitted. Without the transmission there could be nothing to commit to; by the same token, without a commitment to what is sent the transmission could not be recognized as such. Perhaps what is most important, for Heidegger, is that we feel the weight of decision and that we feel the responsibility inherent in response, without which we cannot truly be seen to respond. Put differently, this notion of destiny can be shown to be another example of Heidegger's proximity to what could be called the logic of the adverbial, insofar as it places emphasis on the importance of questions of "how"—questions of the *way* in which we might respond, such that we may feel responsible and therefore come into the realm of responsibility as such. For if we cannot feel the weight of our response, then, for Heidegger, this response would appear to be fatal in both senses of the word: being something

automatic and inevitable—a "spasm" rather than a response—and something that presents the risk of a death blow (*Groundless Grounds*, 149).

Following Heidegger's account, the "sending" and "destining" of Being dynamically occur whilst the fundamental question of the meaning of Being becomes increasingly obscured. For Heidegger, the great Metaphysical thinkers of the Western tradition, who were *only* interested in identifying an *absolute* ground for beings that could be made present to rational thought, are caught up in a forgetting of Being that seems to be tied to the epochal configurations of Being itself. As Heidegger argues, "because metaphysics interrogates beings as beings, it remains concerned with beings and does not turn itself towards Being as Being" ("Introduction to What is Metaphysics," 278). However, returning to "The Question Concerning Technology," we find Heidegger investigating the possibility of the modern technological epoch as being potentially the end of the epochal emergence, or history, of Being. For Heidegger, it is the rise of modern technology as a mode of revealing that functions to stamp or "en-frame" (*Ge-stell*)[4] the nature of beings or entities in such a way as to condition them for a seemingly endless manipulation and calculation—i.e., as a kind of raw material that can further the pervasive nature of modern technology and modern technical systems—and that functions as the end of the "history of Being." As Schürmann states, the history of Being's epochal character finds

> its ending in technology, understood not as a set of tools for some people's material culture—as one would speak of Roman or medieval technology—but as the phenomenal configuration of the twentieth century. (*Heidegger On Being and Acting*, 17)

The "phenomenal configuration of the twentieth century," which for Heidegger is "en-framing," serves to reduce all beings to a kind of "standing-reserve," an understanding of beings as determined by their maximum capacity to be ordered, exploited, and utilized for the development of this broader technological configuration of phenomena. As Heidegger states in "The Question Concerning Technology":

> The forester who, in the wood, measures the felled timber and to all appearances walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather

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[4] Here it is worth emphasizing the varied significance of the German prefix "Ge." The "Ge" prefix can be used both to form a collective noun and, with verbal nouns, to denote repetition or continuation. Heidegger stresses the dual sense of collecting or grouping and repetition that can be found in the "Ge" prefix through hyphenating the German "*Gestell*"—which can be literally translated into English as "frame."

is today commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he
knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose. (18)

Moreover, this phase of mass calculation, manipulation, and ordering that characterizes the technological epoch appears to be the terminal phase of the "history of being" insofar as within this shift Heidegger argues that we find the essential occurrence of the "abandonment of beings by being" (*Contributions to Philosophy*, 348)—an abandonment that thus constitutes the terminal phase of the history of Being as the time of crisis.

"The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking" is one of Heidegger's later reflections, first published in France in 1966, a decade before his death in 1976. In this piece Heidegger states that philosophy's dynamic historical movement comes to its end in the modern technological epoch as it fractures into a set of independent natural and social sciences, each of which attempts a process of self-refinement and ever increasing technological specialization (313-4). With regards to these sciences, Heidegger names psychology, sociology, and anthropology as being just three examples of disciplines that claim independence from philosophy whilst also attending to questions that philosophy would have once asked, such as: "is there a human nature?" or "what is the proper role of the state?" Indeed, given the extent to which Heidegger appeared to have kept up to date with some elements of modern physics—since references to modern physics appear in many of his writings, but especially in texts such as "Science and Reflection" or "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics"—Heidegger would have no doubt conceded that twentieth century physics had superseded metaphysical speculation as a means of discussing and apprehending the nature of the physical world. However, Heidegger did not view philosophy's supersedence by the various independent sciences as something that had occurred despite the best efforts of philosophical thought—as if metaphysics was pushed aside by some greater external power. Against this view, Heidegger discusses the "end of philosophy" or the "completion" of philosophy not as a mere disillusionment, but instead as a fulfillment of one of philosophy's "decisive characteristic[s]" (ibid, 313). Heidegger states that, within the Greek age of philosophy a space for thinking is first opened up, and it is this space that acts as a precondition for the emergence and development of the sciences themselves (ibid, 313). In a manner that perhaps should not be taken as coincidental, Heidegger provides an account of metaphysical philosophy that is in a sense analogous to the

bestowing withdrawal of Being itself, insofar as philosophy, in entering into its "end," must withdraw so as to allow the full reign of the independent sciences as those specialized fields that function to legislate the various domains of being (ibid, 313). Heidegger writes:

> the development of philosophy into the independent sciences that, however, interdependently communicate among themselves ever more markedly, is the legitimate completion of philosophy. Philosophy is ending in the present age. It has found its place in the scientific attitude of socially active humanity. But the fundamental characteristic of this scientific attitude is its cybernetic, that is, technological character. (ibid, 313)

The thinking native to the confluence of science and technology, which for Heidegger is wedded to the logic of efficiency (or utility and productivity), is fundamentally *cybernetic* in character, and is, therefore, underpinned by the tendency to control (ibid, 313-4). As Michael Zimmerman has clarified, Heidegger uses the term cybernetics, which is derived from the Greek *kybernetes* or "steersman," in order to articulate the extent to which calculation, ordering, and control came to be the governing principles of our engagement with entities within the modern world (*Heidegger's Confrontation With Modernity,* 200). On Heidegger's account, cybernetics, as the study of both systems of control and effective organization, comes to determine the very possibility of "knowledge" within the modern world. Moreover, when asked—in the famous *Der Spiegel* interview of 1966—what he felt had ultimately come to replace philosophy in the modern world, Heidegger responded with: "cybernetics" ("Only A God Can Save Us," 108). Elsewhere he stated:

> this science corresponds to the determination of man as an acting social being. For it is the theory of the regulation of the possible planning and arrangement of human labour. Cybernetics transforms language into an exchange of news. The arts become regulated-regulating instruments of information. ("The End of Philosophy," 313)

Accordingly, as science, philosophy, and art come to be increasingly underpinned by a cybernetic logic of control, Heidegger argues that it then follows that their respective works become thinkable only in relation to their capacity to further processes of calculation, manipulation, and efficiency. This is to say that, for Heidegger, the cybernetic age of technology is one in which beings themselves come to be determined as that which can be exploited, utilized, and optimized.

However, while Heidegger's discussion of the cybernetic enslavement of entities to systems of calculation and control certainly conjures a fairly brutal account

of modernity, a world so cold and violent that it very well may seem deserving of the term "crisis," for Heidegger the true crisis is not the impoverished mode of existence possible for entities in the modern world, but, rather, the apparent absence of an alternative space for thinking. We can find some evidence of this position in Heidegger's comments on modern science and especially the threat of the atomic bomb. Heidegger wrote that

> science's knowledge, which is compelling within its own sphere, the sphere of objects, already had annihilated things as things long before the atomic bomb exploded. The bomb's explosion is only the grossest of all gross confirmations of the long-since-accomplished annihilation of the thing: the confirmation that the thing remains nil. ("The Thing" 168)

The crisis of modernity is therefore not the crisis of a world in which the physical annihilation of entities can be almost assured. Instead, the crisis resides in the sheer dominance of scientific, or what he would later call cybernetic thinking, a dominance so profound that, for Heidegger, the possibility of approaching things as "things," that is to say, the possibility of approaching entities other than as objects of manipulation and control—objects that gain their "value" from their utility to subjects—appears unlikely. More worrying for Heidegger is that the modern world is seemingly unperturbed by the absence of such an alternative space for thought. Or, more precisely, Heidegger is troubled by the absence of true philosophers or true thinkers who both understand the nature of the crisis and are open to the possibility of the intrusion of some new mode of being and thinking. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that there is little in Heidegger's writing to indicate that this crisis of thinking was to be mediated by a plurality of bodies and cultures. The task of meditating on the crisis of modernity is left, for Heidegger, "For the few—For the rare" (*Contributions to Philosophy*, 11). The problem of thinking through the possibility for the emergence of an alternate horizon of intelligibility, or, perhaps, the problem of becoming the addressee of another possibility for thought—another sending grasped differently from that of the modern technological epoch—is left to those

> few, who from time to time *question* again, i.e., newly put the essence of truth up for decision. For the rare, who are endowed with the great courage required

for solitude, in order to think the nobility of beyng and to speak of its
uniqueness. (ibid, 11-12)[5]

It would be difficult to locate a single name for these few and rare individuals who are able to pose questions about the fundamental question of the being of being, to meditate on how the modern technological epoch has come to mask this very question itself. Over the course of Heidegger's writings we read of similar figures, seemingly united in their rareness and fewness, under the guises of the philosopher, the guide, and the thinker.[6] Regardless of the name given to this figure it is spoken of as rare and unique all the same, and while Heidegger did show a fondness for regional tropes and pastoral references—and accordingly had a certain sympathy for the "everyday"—the philosopher or thinker is presented as an isolated figure *against* the largely oblivious and banal majority. Indeed, Heidegger's reference in *Being and Time* to the discourse of "the they," the "idle chatter" in which we are immersed "initially and for the most part," and through which are gripped and "mastered," betrays a certain hostility to the everydayness of modernity (161; H167). The "idle chatter" of "the they," that is to say, the discourse that is shared by the majority of people as they attempt to navigate their way through the world as best they can, is presented as a mere circulating of signs or "gossiping and passing the world along," through which we come to "understand" the world without having to pose fundamental questions (ibid, 163; H169). For Heidegger, the "idle talk" of "the they" is the set of anonymous opinions and ideas that circulate and in so doing dissimulate the absence of thought itself. Heidegger writes that, "idle talk, which everyone can snatch up, not only divests us of the task of genuine understanding, but develops an indifferent intelligibility for which nothing is closed off any longer" (ibid, 163; H169).

However, Heidegger clarifies that, with regards to the "idle talk" of "the they," "our interpretation has a purely ontological intention and is far removed from any moralizing critique of everyday Dasein and from the aspirations of a 'philosophy of culture'" (ibid, 161; H167). The everyday character of our "Dasein," our "being-there" or our being as entities that are always already "there" within a horizon of intelligibility, is on Heidegger's account inclined towards the "idle chatter" of "the

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[5] The translators have used "Beyng" here to render the archaic German "*das Seyn*" (*Contributions to Philosophy*, 5). Such a term is potentially used to differentiate the being of Being from entities or existence as such. The usage of "beyng," however, is rare outside of *Contribution to Philosophy (of the Event)*.

[6] See respectively: *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, *Country Path Conversations*, and "The End of Philosophy and the Task for Thinking."

they." Following Heidegger's account, it seems that engaging with a moralizing critique of the everyday obliviousness to the fundamental crisis of modernity, as is exhibited by the majority of human beings, would involve misunderstanding the nature of the crisis as a crisis only discernable by the rare and few. Indeed, it is interesting to note that, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger foreshadows at least one of the key elements of Badiou's and Žižek's polemic against postmodern philosophy, insofar as he is willing to dismiss the study of culture as secondary to the concerns of philosophy. As Alec McHoul has argued, Heidegger was largely dismissive of "philosophies of culture" or "theories of culture" insofar as they interpreted culture based on observations and analysis of "nature, economy, climate, topography, society, state, genius, spirit" as opposed to being able to ask what Heidegger understood to be the fundamental ontological questions of the modern epoch: "why is the question of the being of being overlooked?" "why do things only appear as objects for subjects?" and so on ("The Ontology of Culture," 102-3). In other words, Heidegger's lack of interest in the specific cultural character of his age appears inseparable from an elitist commitment to the rarity and uniqueness of the true philosopher or thinker who can ask fundamental questions of their own time. For Heidegger, as for Badiou and Žižek (see chapter one), the philosophical inquiry into the plurality of divergent cultural forms on offer at a particular time can only distract from the fundamental crisis of modernity, a crisis that is simply foreclosed to the average and everyday mode of existence.

Indeed, while Heidegger's specific account of the modern technological epoch and the fundamental questioning that must arise in response to the crisis of modernity is not directly reproduced by contemporary continental philosophers, there is nevertheless a sense in which his discussion of modernity as a historical state of crisis, and the role of the philosopher as the anointed unique figure who faces the crisis with fundamental questions, is echoed in the work of Badiou and Žižek. For example, Badiou engages this Heideggerian thematic insofar as he presents the modern world as being in a state of crisis, and emphasizes philosophy as the site were the nature of this crisis can be thought through. For Badiou, the crisis of the modern world cannot be understood in terms of the rise of technological systems of control and the forgetting of the "coming to presence" of this historical epoch. Badiou argues that Heidegger was an "old reactionary" and was too nostalgic in his approach to pre-

modern, and especially ancient Greek thought (*Philosophy and the Event*, 94).
However, Badiou agrees with Heidegger insofar as the crisis must be understood as
being situated within philosophical thought, and as requiring fundamental questions.
Yet, for Badiou, Heidegger fell short insofar as he did not understand that "thought is
nothing if it is not governed or commanded by the possibility of emancipation for the
whole of humanity" (ibid, 94). For Badiou, the "crisis of emancipatory politics, the
crisis of the Idea" is the trap of seeing a romanticism of the pre-modern, or an
apologetics for the "contemporary democratic world" as being the only viable
alternatives (ibid, 94). Badiou clarifies the sense of the term "crisis" as he uses it in an
interview with John Van Houdt when he states that

> the very nature of the crisis today is not, in my opinion, the crisis of
> capitalism, but the failure of socialism. And maybe I am the philosopher of the
> time where something like the "Great Hypothesis" coming from the
> nineteenth-century—and maybe much more, for the French Revolution—is in
> crisis. So, it is the crisis of the idea of revolution. But behind the idea of
> revolution is the crisis of the idea of another world, of the possibility of, really,
> another organization of society, and so on. ("The Crisis of Negation," 234)

For Badiou the contemporary world is plunged into crisis because of the absence of
an idea of another world, a world that is antithetical to either a nostalgic pre-
modernity or the liberal democratic capitalism of today. As Badiou puts it, "what kind
of politics is *really* heterogeneous to what capital demands?—that is today's
question," (*Ethics*, 106). As has been mentioned, for Badiou this politics can only
take the form of the "event," a rupture with a prevailing situation in which a group
starts "to think there is another possibility," a possibility that is utterly invisible within
the prevailing situation of politics—for example, the liberal democratic state—and
therefore can only arrive through a process of subtraction or withdrawal from the state
(*Philosophy and the Event*, 11). Furthermore, and as Hallward argues, Badiou is not
interested in the idea that "everything is political" and that the struggle over the
particular identities and particular cultural forms of life constitutes politics (*A Subject
to Truth*, 224). Badiou names this latter kind of thinking "democratic materialism"
and argues that "postmodernism" is another possible name for the "contemporary
conviction" that "*there are only bodies and languages*" (*Logic of Worlds*, 1-2).
Therefore, on Badiou's account, it is this relinquishing of the possibility of a future
"event" that will universally address humanity and offer a possibility irreducible to

what is offered within our present situation—i.e., an alternative to liberal democratic politics and the global market—that characterizes the contemporary crisis.

Similarly, while Žižek may not accept Heidegger's history of metaphysics, there is nevertheless a sense in which he seems to echo the concluding sentiment of "The Question Concerning Technology" (34-5) when he states that, "true hope only exists where there is danger" (*Demanding the Impossible*, 95). For Žižek, the danger that we face today is not so much the obvious violence that has resulted from the global financial crisis or some other obvious material problem, but is instead our inability to conceive of alternatives, our inability to apprehend the "act" in all its radicality. As Žižek states, the real danger is not the greed and corruption that was exposed through the global financial crisis, but it is instead "the system. It forces you to be corrupt" ("Don't Fall In Love With Yourselves," 68). Therefore, for Heidegger, Badiou, and Žižek alike the crisis that is faced in modernity is not reducible simply to the manifestations of violence that we encounter in our day to day lives or via news media, but is instead a crisis that must be approached in philosophical—as distinct from economic or sociological—terms. As Žižek argues in his text *On Belief*, figures such as Francis Fukuyama were routinely mocked for their discussion of a positive "end of history," that is to say, the assumption that the fall of communism in 1989 would give rise to the universal recognition of liberal-democracy and global capitalism as *the* solution to human suffering (111). Such a thesis was mocked because it seemed to ignore the obvious fact that all sorts of struggles will continue no matter the extent to which both liberal-democracy and global capitalism emerge as dominant forces (ibid, 111). However, for Žižek the naïve positive "end of history" thesis, which sees in the figures of liberal-democracy and globalization the end to the search for forms of political and social organization, is preferable to the counter-argument that "history is still alive" insofar as figures like Fukuyama are at least able to grasp the properly historical, and we could add Heideggerian, character of history (ibid, 111). As Žižek states, Fukuyama's notion of

> "the end of history" is much closer to the true historical approach than the simplistic globalized historicism (i.e. the naïve counter-argument that history is far from over, that struggles and changes continue), since it involves the notion of a radical BREAK, the rupture between BEFORE and AFTER—and such a rupture in the continuum of evolution IS the mark of HISTORY— "history" in the radical sense of the term is nothing but the succession of such ruptures which redefine the very MEANING of history. (ibid, 111)

For Žižek, the paradox of the positive "end of history" thesis once espoused by figures such as Fukuyama is that, in discussing the emergence of a post-historical condition, they are ultimately "closer to true historicity than those who mock them, insisting that history goes on, that the struggles are far from over" (ibid, 111-2). On Žižek's account, these struggles that are named to counter the idea of "the end of history" are problematic insofar as they lack the "proper historical tension" that is needed for them to be truly resistant to a global capitalist ordering (ibid, 112). There is again a remarkable similarity here between Žižek's locating of the "true" contemporary danger in our blindness to the end of history—i.e., our forgetting of the need for a new sequence that is irreducible to the current order of capitalism—and Heidegger's assertion that the "true" danger of nuclear technology is not the atomic bomb but our blindness to the history of metaphysics in the modern technological epoch ("The Thing," 164). For both thinkers the modern world is one in which we find the challenge of entering into a new temporality of intelligibility, from which the very meaning of history can be rethought, and the danger of failing to live up to this challenge.

From this discussion of the lineage of the philosophical thinking, from Heidegger to Badiou, of crisis and the privileging of fundamental questioning we can draw out the problem of the elitism that appears inextricably bound to the insistence on philosophy as the privileged site for thinking through the crisis. While Badiou and Žižek are suspicious of Heidegger's history of metaphysics and his particular account of the crisis, they nevertheless affirm, like Heidegger, the failure for philosophical thought to think through a radically different possibility for thought—a possibility that is irreducible to the logics that each figure sees as being dominant in modernity, whether this is framed in terms of cybernetics or late capitalism—*is the very essence of the crisis as such*. Such a position is used to justify the exaltation of philosophy as a kind of master discourse, insofar as the latter is the only mode of thought— according to these figures—that is able to recognize that the incapacity to seek out a decision that is not already grounded in the prevailing logics of modernity is the crisis *tout court*. As Hans Sluga clarifies in *Heidegger's Crisis*, the meaning of "crisis" originally designated a legal decision between opposed choices, and later related to a potential turning point in an illness where the patient will either come to recover or die (61). Sluga argues that, particularly in the early twentieth century the notion of

"crisis" as a decisive turning point in uncertain times gained greater popularity, especially in the unstable political regimes of Germany in the 1930s (ibid, 61). It is therefore important to note that the thinking of "crisis," particularly in the works of Heidegger and Badiou, does not necessarily produce an embrace of normative rules that must be followed in order for crisis to be overcome—indeed, and as Sluga notes, crises are conventionally understood to be plagued by uncertainty, and, moreover, it is this uncertainty that inhibits simply affirming readily available solutions or actions. However, the framing of modernity in terms of the sense of crisis seems to lead inevitably to a desire for decisiveness that functions to exclude and subordinate certain phenomena at the expense of our being open to unforeseen possibilities for resistance. In a sense Heidegger's and Badiou's respective designations of the crisis— in the case of the former, as the forgetting of the question of Being and, in the case of the latter, as the failure of a contemporary revolutionary idea—cannot help but minimize the significance of certain other forms of "crisis"—such as the crisis of patriarchy and violence to women, the crisis of racism as the subjugation of non-whites to white power, the crisis of ecology and the potential extinction of terrestrial life.[7] However, perhaps such an appeal to the various aforementioned crisis terms is simply incompatible with the narrative provide by Heidegger, Badiou, and Žižek, in which the crisis can only be truly revealed through a process of philosophical reflection and questioning.

One of the difficulties we find in Badiou's and Žižek's writing is the extent to which contemporary thought and practice is defined in advance as complicit with the crisis, external to fundamental questioning, and therefore excluded in favour of that which can be made expedient to their philosophy. Just as Heidegger saw much of the art, thought, and political action of his own time as being nihilistic and complicit with the crisis of the modern technological epoch, so too does Badiou relegate much of contemporary existence as being largely superfluous to the question of emancipatory politics. Badiou argues that he is unable to see much of value in contemporary art because he does not see how it corresponds to an event that is significantly different from the events of what is conventionally referred to as the modernist avant-gardes

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[7] Indeed, Badiou explicitly refutes the idea that "global warming" can be named as the contemporary crisis, arguing that the present suffering of millions of people all over the globe—especially outside of the "developed" west—means that the imagined catastrophe of global warming pales to the existing violence of global capitalism and the crisis of the revolutionary idea (*Philosophy and the Event*, 35).

(*Philosophy and Event*, 77-8). For Badiou, there seems to be little in the way of contemporary art practice that can gesture towards the irruption of an "event" embodying or signaling modes of resistance to the regimes of circulation and exchange that he associates to global capitalism. It is for this reason that Badiou states with all sincerity in the conclusion of his article "Third Sketch of a Manifesto of Affirmationist Art" that "it is better to do nothing than to work formally towards making visible what the West declares to exist" (148). With regards to politics, and as Hallward has noted, only a few major interruptions in which the status quo of political organization and thought is radically disrupted—such as the Jacobin Revolution, the emergence of Marxism, the emergence of Bolshevism, and the Maoist cultural revolution—can count as properly political "events" (*Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, 226). Badiou is also dismissive of the potential for liberal democracies to produce anything significantly resistant insofar as such states wish to impose on humanity an "animal humanism" in which humanity appears as a "*pitiable animal*"—that is to say, an animal of mere subsistence apart from any truth (*The Century*, 175). Accordingly, it seems hard to square Badiou's rejection of actually existing contemporary art, politics, and ideology—in the form of "humanism"—with a pluralist affirmation of contemporary phenomena, insofar as he appears to offer a clear demarcation between resistant and complicit, or between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. That is to say, for Badiou, the counter-hegemonic and the resistant has not been seen yet and cannot emerge except as a radical break from what is seen and known in the contemporary world.

While Žižek's works, as noted in the previous chapter, abound with reference to contemporary popular culture, advertising, and current news events, some theorists have criticized him for being unable to locate anything resembling a resistant potential in these forms, forms that then appear by way of Žižek's account to be merely symptoms of capitalism's violence and volatility. As Judtih Halberstam asserts, "Žižek uses popular culture and film in particular only to keep proving his Lacanian take on everything as good and true and to accuse others of being bamboozled by the shiny candy wrappers of Hollywood cinema" (*The Queer Art of Failure*, 174). For Halberstam, Žižek's approach can only locate in a popular form, such as the children's film *Kung Fu Panda*, a process of ideological naturalization, to the extent that the film's positioning of its mostly pre-school audience to sympathize

with the plight of a roly-poly idiot protagonist helps to engrain the idea that it is natural that other entitled idiots—such as George W. Bush or Silvio Berlusconi—come to power and rise above all others (ibid, 173-4). Halberstam finds further evidence of Žižek's dismissive attitude to the politics of the everyday in his hesitance regarding the politics of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Žižek's dismissive stance, according to Halberstam, is built largely on a suspicion of the material and existential dimensions of the protest movement, and a fear that the protestors were perhaps too caught up in a romantic form of carnivalesque satisfaction when, for Žižek, "carnivals come cheap" (quoted in *Gaga Feminism*, 135). For Halberstam, however, the Occupy movement's very political power resides in the possibilities that are opened up by blurring the distinctions between the political and the apolitical, the serious and the comedic, and the ordinary—or everyday—and the extraordinary (ibid, 135). Žižek's argument, so Halberstam contends, is too centred on a distinction between the everyday as an apolitical and non-resistant mode of life and the possibility of a rupture within that everyday situation, a rupture that would begin the formation of an alternative to the contemporary liberal democratic model that is powerless, on Žižek's account, against capital (ibid, 135). On Halberstam's account, then, we find in Žižek both the dismissal of the everyday as a mode of resistance—as they claim, for Žižek, "what matters is the day after, when we will have to return to normal life. Will there be any changes then?"—and a prior commitment to opposing the everyday to a moment of genuine or true resistance to the forces of global capitalism (ibid, 135).

One of the most problematic consequences that stems from the affirmation of crisis, as is found in Heidegger, Badiou, and Žižek, is the tendency, therefore, to reinstall a form of philosophical authority over other disciplines, other modes of thought and other forms of praxis. While Heidegger, Badiou, and Žižek respectively affirm a form of pluralism, each positions a type of philosophical thought as being necessary to assess the value and significance of this plurality—separating art from "mere" entertainment, radical questioning from the "mere" circulation of opinion, and decisiveness from "mere" democratic deliberation. Moreover, while each values a diverse array of fields and modes of comportment, each designates a form of philosophical thinking as the discourse through which such value can be articulated. It is for this reason that François Laruelle has argued that Heidegger and Badiou are,

after Plato, the two great philosophical "planifiers": their philosophical writing provides a centralized body of works that manages the cycles and flows of a plural economy of human comportment (*Anti-Badiou*, xxxviii). Speaking specifically of Badiou, Laruelle states that this work exhibits "a certain distance, a seriousness, an authority, an elitist obsession with authority" (ibid, 29). In reading Badiou, Laruelle argues, we encounter "a rarified atmosphere" and a fetishization of a "Nietzschean style of greatness, of great politics, of the great Heideggerian philosopher" and of "an epoch of greatness that philosophers fantasize about" (ibid, 35). Against this fetish for greatness, then, and against this proclivity for the philosophical maneuver of plucking the rare from what is pre-designated as ubiquitous, unremarkable, and politically complicit, what other possibilities remain for philosophical thought?

What if, instead of thinking through philosophy as the unique discourse of the rare and few who "understand" the true extent of the "crisis" of modernity, we began with an attempt to resist such philosophical "planification" by starting, as Derrida states, not from the assumption of the primacy of fundamental questions accessible only to philosophy, but instead from the sense of an affirmation of what is other, strange, and "to come"? (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 53) As John D. Caputo puts it, recounting Derrida's point,

> prior to any question, preceding, passing through, and surpassing questioning, is a more original affirmation, a "yes" to the other, to the neighbour and the stranger, a "yes" that comes before the question, before science and critique and research, even before philosophy, an affirmation of something to come. (ibid, 53)

Such a sense of affirmation raises the question of the possibilities of what could emerge from a less elitist and less decisive form of philosophical thought, a form of thinking that does not subordinate, in advance, other disciplines and forms of *praxis* as being superficial and secondary to that of philosophy—or of deriving their value from a philosophical system. Such an openness or "original affirmation" would appear to run counter to the logic of crisis, and thereby suspends the supposed necessity of a decisiveness regarding the separation of "true" philosophical thought from its semblance. And yet, would such a thinking of affirmation, of saying "yes" to what is to come, force the thinker to adopt a position of timid acquiescence? of saying "yes" to everything, of stating that everything is political and potentially counter-hegemonic even if such a counter-hegemonic possibility appears unlikely? If we turn

away from fundamental questioning and the immanence of crisis, will thought, as Heidegger and Badiou argue, have failed to meet the challenges that the world presents to it, and become merely relegated to the indignity of *doxa* or opinion?

In *The Insistence of God*, Caputo explores the possibilities that can be afforded by a radical indecisiveness of "perhaps"—a term that can refer to a largely excluded, and marginalized way of thinking which, while not presented in an explicitly political frame, nevertheless raises the possibility of an otherwise that is resistant to the philosophical thinking of crisis. Caputo argues that, traditionally, we read philosophical and theological texts—and for the most part theology is what concerns Caputo in *The Insistence of God*—in order to be helped through difficult decisions that we cannot help but feel indecisive about (3). For this reason, Caputo argues that "there is every reason for philosophers and theologians to fear this one small word" because, in taking "perhaps" seriously, philosophy and theology open themselves up to the possibility of being unbound from whatever authority these disciplines have left (ibid, 3). Indeed, it seems that, in these aforementioned accounts of crisis, there can be little room for the word "perhaps," since the philosopher's conviction in the essential nature of the crisis is part of what distinguishes them as one of the rare and few. Indeed, in affirming "perhaps" philosophers and theologians run the risk of appearing indecisive, uncommitted, and cowardly (ibid, 3-4). As already indicated in chapter one, some critics of postmodernism—notably, Žižek—have questioned the sincerity of the gestures of hesitancy expressed by way of the postmodern affirmation of openness towards difference and otherness. Caputo likewise singles out Žižek as among those who fear the supposed "abdication of faith, decision, ethics, judgment and knowledge" that seemingly accompanies an affirmation of "perhaps" (ibid, 4). Against this conventional view of those who affirm "perhaps" in the face of the call to decide, to commit, to believe, and to know, Caputo presents another thinking of "perhaps" as a form of affirmation of what he refers to as the "impossible" and the "event." Again, such an association, as is made by Caputo, between a notion of "perhaps" on the one hand, and the notions of "event" and "impossibility," on the other hand, might appear to go against a conventional wisdom that would see the event as belonging to the order of being and of what has happened, and the impossible as belonging to the order of non-being and what cannot happen. And on that logic, "perhaps" would sit in-between, and yet nevertheless remain separate from both of

those orders. However, Caputo's discussion of the "event" and the "impossible" differs greatly from the conventional understanding of these terms. Caputo gains such an unorthodox sense of "event" and "impossibility" from his engagement with the works of Derrida, and, as we shall see, Caputo draws upon Derrida's work in order to explicate the sense in which he uses these terms.

As we have said, Caputo turns towards a reconsidering of the disposition of "perhaps" in order to both avoid what we could call the somewhat totalitarian necessity of logic and the "mere opinion" and "indecision" that is typically associated with "perhaps" (ibid, 4). The disposition of "perhaps" is the best suited on Caputo's account to affirming the event, which, Caputo states, is designated by being that which "cannot be seen coming" and that which "is going on in what is happening" (ibid, 82-3). Such a designation might seem cryptic and obscure, but Caputo's discussion of a third term, "insistence," can help us to understand the peculiarity of the event. As was mentioned, we conventionally understand events to belong to the order of being insofar as an event is something that has happened. For Caputo, however, in everything happening there is something going on that cannot be foreseen or grasped if we stick to our conventional modes of understanding and apprehending. Events, as this unforeseen "going on" that is hidden in what happens, cannot be said to exist—as this would refer to the happening as such, to what we grasp as having happened—but must instead be discussed as *insisting* (ibid, 83). At this point we might stop and ask why we should assume that there is some mysterious insistent evental dimension to what is happening. We might seek instead simply to affirm the conventional observation that, while an event might feature dimensions that might not appear to us immediately—or even for a great length of time—it nevertheless features a limited set of attributes, that these attributes simply exist, and that any mention of an "event" that insists and yet does not exist is speculative nonsense. However, such a view overlooks the rather simple and empirically observable fact that when things happen we are more often than not met with a certain insistent sense that things are not as they seem, that something else might be going on or that there is more to what is happening than meets the eye. That is to say that, it is actually rare for something to happen and for us to simply accept it at face value, to feel assured that what we "know" has happened is all that there is to it and that all accounts have therefore been settled. It is important to note here, however, that we are not heading into a kind of

psychological account that suggests that there is some "internal" sense that in every happening something else is going on. For Caputo, it is not just a matter of feeling that there is more to what happens than simply "what happens"—i.e., what has come to presence as what "happens"—but instead that in happenings themselves something more is "going on" (ibid, 83). The event, therefore, is that "otherwise" or that difference to what exists that insists upon us and makes a claim on us. As Caputo states, the event gestures towards the moment of confrontation with a thing when it is not "itself" but is instead "perhaps more than itself, otherwise than itself" when we are confronted by the possibility that something "is not yet what it perhaps can be, or how [it could be]" (ibid, 84). The event, however, cannot be looked for or searched out or assumed to be happening in a certain constrained guise, form, or level—the event is not *necessarily* happening at a micro or macro level—and, therefore, it is in this sense that the event is "impossible." As Caputo clarifies, the sense of impossibility being used here is not of the order of absolute impossibility or incoherence, as we would encounter with a contradictory description such as "a square circle" (*On Religion*, 10-11). Instead, the impossible—and at times Caputo highlights the negation of the "im-" prefix in this word by hyphenating it as "im-possible"—is that which intrudes into the possible in the sense of an irruption in the possible of something that we simply could not foresee or could not prepare for (ibid, 10-11). Indeed, as Caputo states in an earlier text *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*, the claim that the event makes on us is impossible insofar as it cannot be fully and completely resolved, since "events divide infinitely into other events. There are no irreducibly simple events to put an end to the analysis of events, to bring it to a satisfying rest" (94).

One of the key illustrations of this impossible event that we find in Caputo's work is the sense of "democracy" that Derrida develops in his text *Specters of Marx*. As Caputo explains it, the notion of democracy that Derrida is interested in is one that is wedded to the openness of futurity (*The Insistence of God*, 84). The future, for Derrida, is not a mere extension of the present—not simply a modification of our sense of what is happening now that is projected into another time called "the future"—but is instead that which is absolutely unknowable and unforeseeable from the standpoint of the present (ibid, 84). This notion of democracy as always "to come" is accordingly regarded as being utterly irreducible to any present or previously

existing democratic state (ibid, 84). Again, such a notion may seem obscure and cryptic, but, in formulating his discussion of democracy in this way—under the auspices of the "to come"—Derrida perhaps reveals something crucial about the very notion of democracy. In contemporary political discourse the notion of democracy is frequently wedded to some idea of a "people's" capacity to be self-determining and free. The hope that we have for democracy is a hope that we have for the *demos* to organize itself in ways that best suit it and are in its best interests, and, as a result, when democratic institutions appear to have become corrupt or seem to have failed the very *demos* they were designed to serve, it is not uncommon to hear such occurrences framed in terms of an "attack on democracy." Perhaps what this kind of formulation refers to is the capacity for corrupt or failed institutions to attack the very capacity of the *demos* to organize itself in a manner that accords with its interests and needs. Furthermore, and as Martin Hägglund has argued, for Derrida there is no sense in speaking of the *demos* as self-identical, as being a "people" fully unified and present to itself (*Radical Atheism*, 172). The seemingly paradoxical consequences of this lack of self-identity, however, is such that what democracy "is" must be able to change, must be open and flexible and not fixed, self-legitimating, or self-serving and therefore cannot ever be said to fully arrive. For this reason, Derrida's insistence on thinking democracy in conjunction with the notion of the "to come" strikes at something very important and often overlooked in discussions of democracy, insofar as his articulation of democracy is wedded to these other notions of "impossibility" and "event." We can find an articulation of the "event" in the notion of "democracy to come," therefore, in the sense that this discussion of democracy gestures towards the irreducibility of that organization of the *demos* to any particular model, representation, or logic of that organization. Therefore, and perhaps to the great disappointment of the legions of political analysts and experts that explain to us "what is happening" in democracies, the evental status of "democracy to come" is to be found in its irreducibility to conventional ways of knowing. If we are going to talk about a "democracy" at all, that is, then we need to acknowledge that there is always more happening than just what has made itself present to us at a particular moment. If you can reduce a democracy to one idea, notion, will, or goal, then you have lost the precise sense of a hope for openness or a potential to be *otherwise* that "democracy" names as such. Moreover, this sense that something more is going on in what is "going on" must be understood as "impossible" since it cannot be limited to a present

state of possibility. For this reason Niall Lucy therefore argues that to "deconstruct identity," and therefore to open up identity, even the "identity" of democracy, to the plurality of a heterogeneous *demos*, is not a destructive gesture but is instead "to love democracy!" (*Beyond Semiotics*, 5).

However, for Žižekian political theorists like Jodi Dean, the Derridean logic of "democracy to come" can only be a "post-political" form of naïve hope that democracy has the capacity to outstrip its malignancies and difficulties ("Politics without Politics," 80). On Dean's account, the notion of "democracy to come" is rather like an abusive spouse whom we never give up on, and who we insist, no matter how much our friends tell us "we could do better" or that "we shouldn't have to put up with this," can change and can do better. For Dean, "democracy to come" entails an enabling logic of "I know but nevertheless" insofar as we know that democracies are corrupt, ineffective, and riddled with hierarchies of wealth and power, but nevertheless we stay committed to them by holding onto the "fantasy" of the "to come" (ibid, 80). However, what Dean gets so fundamentally wrong about the very notion of "to come" is that it should intervene, not at the moment when we feel we have had enough of democracy as a political philosophy or as a set of institutions of governance, but, instead, at the moment when we look to formulate an ontological account of democracy as such. This is to say that, for Dean, democracy can be absolutely grasped with both hands and be known with certainty. Against such ontological representations, the "to come" is that "call" or "promise" that *insists* in the guise of a sense that things could can be and perhaps are "otherwise," an insistence that "presses in upon the present and makes the present tremble with insecurity" (*The Insistence of God*, 84). Rather than such a "call" or "promise" leading to a post-political complicity with any present state of democracy—as if Derrida and Caputo suggest we simply grit our teeth and think of what is "to come" as things get worse— such a sense that things can be otherwise presents not only the injunction to engage with the world and to changes things, but, furthermore, opens us up to opportunities for change in things, happenings, and people whom we may have otherwise simply written off or ignored.

Returning to the notion of "perhaps," for Caputo, it is only this disposition that can truly allow for an openness to the event and to the impossibilities that are bound up with it. If we reduce our encounters with things to the logics, models,

representations, or narratives that are simply habitual and comfortable for us then we greatly limit our capacity to encounter something that is genuinely new and radical. As Caputo states, the disposition of "perhaps" is less a method or approach to knowing than it is a form of "non-knowing," that is, a form of openness that is irreducible to "ignorance" (*The Insistence of God*, 5). In learning to say "perhaps"— and indeed it must be learnt, as few things are as hard as admitting that one cannot be sure, that things aren't as simple as they might appear, or that it is impossible to be certain on a particular subject or with regards to a particular situation—Caputo hopes to be able to nurture a capacity for being open to that sense of otherwise that prevents things from being dull, predictable, and hopeless. In being able to learn to say "perhaps," one becomes open to the uncertainty of things and therefore also open to the capacity for things to radically change or to unshackle themselves from our expectations and assumptions. This is not to say that learning to say "perhaps" to things involves a starry-eyed optimism about the world however, for, as Caputo states, learning to say "perhaps" also involves an openness to the possibility that things "may also turn out to be a disaster" that things may turn out to be worse than what we thought (ibid, 6). This is, however, part of the difficulty of learning to say "perhaps," insofar as a true openness to the sense of an otherwise in things must involve accepting that those things we believe in and are committed to may turn out to have immense flaws and malignancies—that the things we assumed were pure and holy are actually anything but. This learning to say "perhaps" to things, rather than insisting on and looking for the comfort of certainty and absolutes is paradigmatic of the postmodern affirmation of difference insofar as it gestures towards the necessary exclusions that must be made in order to maintain the fiction of the self-identity of a thing or happening, and, furthermore, open us up to the contingent possibilities that such exclusions obscure.

From such a thinking of "perhaps" the designation of the modern world as in a crisis state is both inevitable and undecidable. Indeed, how can one live in a world of such economic, ecological, and cultural precariousness without being seized by the terrifying thought that "the crisis" has well and truly arrived. However, on Derrida's account it is perhaps better to speak of "the time"—and not just *our* time or the time of our children or grandchildren—as being "out of joint," so as to "avoid speaking of crisis, a very insufficient concept, and so as to avoid deciding between the bad as

suffering and the bad as wrong or as crime" (*Specters of Marx*, 97). What does this mean? Why is the concept of "crisis" so insufficient for Derrida? Such insufficiency, perhaps, results from the inability to decide if the crisis is truly at hand, and if the violence one encounters is merely a form of suffering that must be endured or a crime that must be fought. That is to say, for Derrida, there appears to be a certain undecidability regarding violence. To decide that violence is justified, since this violence is directed towards a "crime" is to annul the undecidability that is the condition for the (im)possibility of decision. Derrida's articulation that "the time is out of joint" is an acknowledgment that the "fundamental" decision, the all important fork in the road that typifies the moment of crisis and from which radically divergent possibilities emerge, is for Derrida indicative of time as such and not just of "our times" or of the "bad times" of crisis. Indeed, if we cannot speak of a "crisis, perhaps" then we cannot speak of decision at all, since, any decision—and especially radical decisions that seize us in moments of anxiety, terror, or elation—must be exposed to the undecidability of the contingency of that decision in order to be a decision, and not a mere spasm (to use an earlier example). This is to say that, for Heidegger, Badiou, and Žižek to justify their exclusions of certain modes of comportment or forms of thought on the basis that they are simply complicit with Western nihilism, capitalism, or some other threatening global force, is to risk effacing the uncertainty or undecidability that makes decisions decidable.

Learning to say "perhaps" is therefore not a self-injunction to remain inactive; nor is it a matter of purging the desire to decide from thought, since, on the contrary, it must be acknowledged that decisions—be they practical or philosophical—are far from avoidable. Learning to say "perhaps" is, instead, a matter of respecting both the undeciability of that for which we decide, that about which we decide, and the very undecidability of decision itself. This is not to suggest that figures such as Heiddegger, Badiou, and Žižek, are entirely deaf to the undecidable, nor is it to imply that these figures valorize naïve forms of absolute certainty in their thinking through of the problem of crisis. However, while these philosophers all embrace the contingent and unforeseeable, there is a sense in which the works of these figures engender a certain preoccupation with a language of decisiveness that follows from a thinking underpinned by a logic of crisis. Within their respective *oeuvres* there is a great deal to be found that is thought provoking and potentially emancipatory.

However, such possibilities are often accompanied by elitist rejections and condemnations of that which fails to be great, distinguished, and polarizing. That is to say, while the works of all three of these figures can be embraced through an affirmation of difference—or through a spirit of "perhaps" that allows us to be open to the unexpected in their writing—their works cannot be entirely dissociated from an enthusiasm for the militant and the decisive. Therefore, to extend further our exploration of the possibilities that can be opened up through an affirmation of "perhaps," we will turn in the next chapter to the question of assumptions or presuppositions that are often uncritically inherited and serve to inhibit our capacity to say "perhaps" to the possibility of encouraging an enthusiasm for resistance and emancipation in the most unlikely of settings and practices.

Chapter Three:
Resistance, Perhaps?

In the previous chapters we explored the philosophical narrative of crisis as an underpinning sensibility through which influential philosophers such as Heidegger, Badiou and Žižek assert the supremacy of philosophical discourse. Insofar as these figures maintain that the absence of a true philosophical alternative to the thinking that they see as native to modernity constitutes a state of crisis, they maintain broadly elitist attitudes regarding the (im)possibility of a radical rupture emerging from the quotidian and everyday. For these figures, something like what Badiou refers to as the "event" can only be a rupture *with* the everyday, and not a rupture that emerges from *within* the everyday, as part of that everydayness. The cultural, political, and intellectual forms of "everyday life under late capitalism" are, in the estimation of these aforementioned figures, discussed in pejorative terms and viewed as merely symptomatic of the crisis and not truly a site of potential resistance to it. This exploration concluded, in chapter two, by turning to Caputo's sense of "perhaps" as a means of articulating a certain form of politics, namely, one that does not suspend the urgency of responding to the challenges presented to us by the world, but, instead, suspends the philosophical tendency towards elitism and stratification that is engendered by figures such as Heidegger, Badiou and Žižek. To summarize the argument of the previous chapter, we could say that to learn to say "perhaps"—as opposed to attempting in advance to make distinctions between phenomena that can be seen as resistant and those that cannot—is to open oneself up to the possibility of the emergence of resistance in a manner that resists the sedimentation of hierarchies and stratifications of resistant action and thought. However, and as we saw by engaging Caputo in the previous chapter, to say "perhaps" to something as a potential site or mode of resistance—and therefore to affirm it in its eventual mode, in line with Derrida's and Caputo's conception of "event"—is to leave behind any assurance that one has found *the* manner by which a struggle *must* be pursued. To say "perhaps" is instead to open oneself up to the contingency that ultimately prevents the self-identity

of resistant action and thought. Or, put differently, in saying "perhaps" one acknowledges the need to be open to the possibility of resistance emerging in the most unlikely of places *and* to the possibility of resistance failing even when one felt assured that it would not or that it could not. Given then that we are attempting to emphasize the possibilities that are bound up with this disposition of "perhaps" how can we account for the fact that such an openness is seemingly so difficult, and that the disposition required to be able to stay open to the possibility of resistance is so often lacking in our discourse?

In order to better articulate this question we can turn to what Deleuze calls the "image of thought" in his now famous text *Difference and Repetition*. While Deleuze did not articulate this notion in order to speak explicitly to political questions—nor to the question of resistance—we can nevertheless find in his writing on the "image of thought" a means of articulating the extent to which even the most obvious and self-evident concepts are plagued by presuppositions that inhibit our capacity to think, and to say "perhaps." Deleuze states that the image of thought is presupposed, that we uncritically inherit it and that it functions to determine "our goals when we try to think" (*Difference and Repetition*, xvi). For Deleuze, what it means to think and what thinking can do is always in excess of our pre-philosophical understanding of what thought is. He argues that we uncritically assume that there is a clear relationship between thought and truth, as if thinking were somehow preordained to strain towards and grasp that which is true (ibid, 132). Moreover, it is assumed that the act of recognition—and the assumed identity that goes along with the recognition of a thing—has something to do with thought, or is an act of thinking. However, for Deleuze an act of mere recognition—for instance, when someone comes across a dog in the street and recognizes it as cute or friendly—should not be misrecognized as being synonymous with thought. Deleuze states that "it cannot be regarded as a *fact* that thinking is the natural exercise of a faculty […] in fact men think rarely, and more often under the impulse of a shock than in the excitement of a taste for thinking" (ibid, 132). The prevalence or force of this image of thought as moral and natural is evident in part through the way we are reproached for "not thinking." For example, if we do the wrong thing or make a mistake we often hear phrases like "think before you act" or "think, you idiot!" Accordingly, the repetition of such phrases creates the impression that thinking is something that we should

simply know how to do (it is natural or innate) and that not to think is to do something wrong (it is irresponsible or careless). But regardless of how few mistakes we make or how much we are able to perform certain tasks that are demanded of us, such an image of thought not only tells us nothing about thinking itself, but, moreover, it hinders our ability to think thought—i.e., to ask questions about what thinking could be. As Alberto Toscano states in his article "Everybody Thinks: Deleuze, Descartes and Rationalism," "Deleuze unceasingly advocates the notion that we do not yet know what it means to think—or we do not know what thought can do" (11).

　　We could therefore discuss the "image of thought" as that which functions as a foundation for thinking despite being ultimately contingent and emergent. While it might appear that Deleuze is advocating the overcoming of the "image of thought" in order to make room for an entirely unbound thinking—a thinking that is without foundation or limitation—it is possible to find in his work what might instead be called a post-foundational approach to thinking. The term "post-foundational" is used by the contemporary political theorist Oliver Marchart in his text *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. For Marchart, post-Heideggerian philosophy has had to face the problem of attempting to resist foundational thinking—i.e., the direct affirmation or implicit presupposition of a singular and self-identical foundation that can act as a transcendental guarantor for thought—whilst relying upon some other term or condition, be it "otherness" or "difference," to act as a new foundation for thought (13). He states that post-foundational thinking always begins with the acknowledgement that foundations are unavoidable and yet also contingent and self-problematizing, and therefore always engendering the possibility of their disruption and mutation (ibid, 13-14). Marchart contrasts post-foundational thinking to anti-foundational thinking, insofar as he sees the latter as involving the assumption that thinking could ever entirely wrest itself from some shared assumptions or sedimentation (ibid, 13). In the context of Deleuze's ideas, then, we can suggest that the "image of thought" is that unavoidable and yet contingent and self-problematizing foundation for thought that simultaneously enables us to have some conception of thinking, and yet also presents the risk of excluding if not effacing the possibilities of other kinds of thought. It is perhaps for this reason that Deleuze speaks of the need for a "new image of thought—or rather, a liberation of thought from those images which imprison it" in *Difference and*

Repetition, as opposed to simply advocating the abolition of the "image of thought" as such (xvi-xvii). His discussion of a plurality of "images of thought" suggests an ongoing process of liberating thought, a potentially endless and always renewable resistance to dominant "images of thought" by way of producing new images of thought that can reveal different possibilities in thinking.

In an analogous fashion—albeit acknowledging in advance the non-equivalence of the two modes of action—we might suggest that, just as thinking is perpetually inhibited and limited by the "image of thought," our capacity to resist is also limited and inhibited by something like an "image of resistance." This is to propose that resistance, as a form both of action and of thought (to the extent that these forms can be so distinguished), remains bound by a dominant and largely unquestioned "sense"—though that is scarcely the right term—of what it means to resist, a "sense" that can function only by way of excluding other modes or possibilities of resistance. Our capacity to say "perhaps" to the unforeseeable resistance that could arise in the most unlikely of times or places will always be inhibited by the contingent and yet unavoidable "image of resistance" on the basis of which we work. Just as Deleuze approaches thought in a post-foundational manner—looking to critique and problematize any attempt to bind thought to necessity, as distinct from simply positing the existence of a thought that is absolutely without foundation—so too must we look towards approaching resistance post-foundationally whilst refraining from attempting to reject outright any "image of resistance" as being without resistant possibilities. This is effectively to say that, whilst it is important to be aware of the contingency of the presuppositions to which we are inevitably beholden, this need not compel us to search for or impose another "image of resistance" that could serve universally and for all struggles. Indeed, neither should this be seen as an injunction for us to seek out a form of resistance that is somehow without presuppositions. Accordingly, over the course of this chapter we shall explore one dominant—though not absolutely or exclusively so—"image of resistance" that permeates our contemporary culture in the guise of the repetition of "action," "optimism," and "balance" as expressions or goals of resistance itself. Indeed, the inflation of such values is seemingly so ubiquitous as to greatly inhibit the consideration of emergent forms of resistance that do not accord with those terms. To consider these possibilities is to risk saying "perhaps" to other terms through which

we can potentially rethink resistance outside of the potentially elitist terms offered by Heidegger, Badiou, and Žižek. However it must be noted that there is nothing straightforwardly complicit about terms like "action," "optimism," and "balance," and neither is there anything necessarily or essentially resistant about them from which we could, in advance, demarcate the resistant and emancipatory from the complicit and subjugating. In order illustrate this idea, we shall turn to the film series *The Matrix* as an influential and powerful example of the functioning of a popular "image of resistance" that manifests through the repetition of the tropes of "action," "optimism," and "balance."

The *Matrix* trilogy is a series of hugely successful science fiction or "cyberpunk" films—*The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003)—directed by Andy and Lana Wachowski. The basic plot of the three films centres on the struggles of a group of militants who have escaped from a giant virtual reality simulation known as "the matrix." The protagonist who goes by the hacker alias "Neo" begins the film unaware of the truth of his and his species's predicament. Neo believes that he is simply living a mundane white collar life in the year 1999; however, once he is contacted by a group of underground hacker-militants lead by the enigmatic Morpheus, Neo comes to learn that he and all of humanity, barring a tiny resistance force, live inside a giant simulation that doubles as an energy extraction system. Neo learns that a form of artificial intelligence long ago dominated the human race, and now the vast majority of the human race lives inside "the matrix," encased in small pods that are designed to intravenously feed humans as it saps thermal energy from them and transmits them the virtual world of life on earth in 1999. Once freed from the matrix, Neo is rescued by Morpheus and his crew, which includes Trinity—a female hacker who will feature as Neo's love interest—and Cypher—a Judas figure who betrays the crew in the first installment of the trilogy. While *The Matrix* stays true to the "cyberpunk" genre by involving largely anti-establishment themes with an emphasis on digital technology, hacking, and various forms of espionage, the film deviates slightly from this genre insofar as it involves a then-uncharacteristically large amount of martial arts-themed fight sequences. Indeed, despite being set in a virtual world that is susceptible to being hacked and modified externally, via digital processes, and internally by way of the minds of those who

have been freed from the matrix, the vast majority of the conflict resolution occurs in the three films by way of physical violence.

As the sociologist and cultural theorist John Stratton notes in his paper "So Tonight I'm Gonna Party Like It's 1999: Looking Forward to the Matrix," not only were the three films financially successful, generating roughly $1.5 billion in total, but, moreover, the trilogy has spawned toys, video games, comic book spin-offs, and a collection of animated short films titled *The Animatrix* (28). The appeal of the film series does not stop with its popularity with the typical movie-going public, however, since the three *Matrix* films have also received a great deal of critical attention from philosophers, film theorists, and science fiction writers alike. As Stratton comments, within only a few years of the release of the first film we saw the publication of a slew of critical texts that sought to explore the philosophical and political themes raised in the film (ibid, 28). Indeed, while it may not have been a surprise to find that a philosopher like Žižek, whose work frequently engages with contemporary cinema, had written on *The Matrix*, far more surprising was the engagement with the film from philosophers less known for their interest with contemporary cinema such as Badiou, not to mention the appearance of the philosopher Cornel West in a significant supporting role in *The Matrix Reloaded* and *Revolutions*. Perhaps part of the appeal for both kinds of audiences is the film's engagement with millennial anxieties surrounding globalization and the ever-contemporary predominance of technological mediation in daily life. Regardless of the reason, however, the films have in many ways come to stand as one of the most popular and enduring aesthetic presentations of resistance in recent times, producing a relatively new set of tropes for conceptualizing what are perhaps conventional notions regarding resistance and counter culture. Indeed, "taking the red pill" or "red pill thinking"—phrases that both refer to a scene in the first film in the trilogy in which Neo learns that accepting the red pill, as opposed to a blue one that is on offer, will open him up to a truth about reality that he has desperately been seeking—have been adopted in popular web culture as being synonymous with escaping from a crowd mentality or of being able to "see through" the conventions of society. Moreover, for economist and former Greek Minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis, *The Matrix* films serve as a perfect example of capital's enslavement of humanity by way of its production of technological innovations that ultimately lead to human redundancy and alienation ("Confessions of an Erratic

Marxist in the Midst of a Repugnant European Crisis," n.p.). Regardless of the analytical import of such a claim, such remarks display the extent to which these films have come to serve as a means of conveying a popular and conventional sense of resistance to decentralized forms of control.

As Roz Kaveney notes in her text *From Alien to the Matrix: Reading Science Fiction Film*, the trilogy of *Matrix* films, and particularly the first installment, produced a "new vocabulary of action," a new set of visual tropes that provided a set of "clichés" that were effectively mined by other production teams for the next "half a decade" (73). In the *Matrix* films we are treated to an almost continuous barrage of what Kaveney refers to as "violently kinetic confrontation[s]" in which we witness the bodies of our protagonists pushed to their absolute limit (ibid, 73). When Neo is able to almost entirely dodge the bullets fired at him by one the matrix's agents, in a scene that exhibited the film's now famous "bullet-time" sequence, Trinity states that she's "never seen anyone move that fast," indicating her sense of wonder at Neo's newly emerging powers. Neo responds to Trinity's amazement simply by gesturing towards the slight wounds he received from being grazed by the agent's gunfire, stating that he " wasn't fast enough." While this kind of nonchalance in the face of danger is a convention of countless action films, it nevertheless highlights the film's internal quest towards ever-greater intensities of action. Indeed, Kaveney comments that perhaps the slight sense of critical disappointment with which the two sequels of *The Matrix* were met is a result of this failure to surmount the sheer intensity of the first film's action sequences (*From Alien to the Matrix*, 73-4). Moreover, the repeated displays of kicks, flips, twirls, jabs, and leaps—some of which are elongated in slow motion, while others occurs in a flurry of movement—are starkly contrasted to the immobility and passivity of the human subjects still enmeshed in the matrix itself. Just as the individuals in Plato's cave allegory are "fettered" and unable to move ("The Republic," 514a), so too are the majority of humans trapped in the matrix unable to move, both insofar as they are mute and fetal outside of the matrix, and in the sense that they are trapped within the virtual possibilities afforded them inside of the matrix. Despite the matrix's virtual status, which allows for radical transformations to occur simply through the intervention of the resistant mind, the struggle between freedom and control is meted out through exhilarating and dynamic physical action. This is not to suggest that *The Matrix*, or either of its sequels, would

have been better films without such action—instead, the opposite is almost assuredly the case. However, the continual presence of the need for action functions to help present and naturalize a certain inherited "image of resistance." To resist is to be endlessly in motion, pushing oneself further and further against the body of one's oppressor. Arguably bound up with this "image of resistance" is the presumption that withdrawal or inaction, while perhaps a necessary element of an overall strategy of action, cannot be grasped as itself a form of resistance. Such a conventional view frames resistance as action, and as a form of action that requires one to put one's body in harm's way and to be willing to physically bear the cost of resisting power.

Through such explosive moments of kinetic violence we are absolutely assured of the characters' allegiances to the resistant cause. In most of the major action sequences in the *Matrix* trilogy it is through hand-to-hand combat that enemies are overcome and resistance is made manifest. Again, this is not criticism of the films themselves, but to the extent that the films are received and celebrated for their anti-establishment themes they potentially engender association between the performance of hard work and notions of resistance. Indeed, this need for the possibility of direct confrontation between foes, and for the blood and sweat of struggle to be made visible, seems to parallel to our broader thinking of the possibilities for resistance—that is to say, the thinking through which existential and conceptual possibilities can be seen as truly resistant. For example, in her text *The Coming Swarm*, a text that engages with new forms of digital activism or "hacktivism" such as DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks, media theorist Molly Sauter engages with numerous critics who have decried online activism as being simply too passive, or as being a "lazy" form of protest and civil disobedience (5-7). By contrast, Sauter argues for the inclusion of DDoS attacks as a serious form of contemporary activism. DDoS attacks occur when "a large number of computers attempt to access one website over and over again in a short amount of time, in the hopes of overwhelming the server, rendering it incapable of responding to legitimate requests (ibid, 2). By using such a tactic, the companies and institutions targeted are forced to confront the costs of their online platforms being disrupted, as well as the costs of reopening access to their online platforms, and are often forced into the media spotlight when such attention may be unwanted—for instance, when a company or institution is trying to downplay accusations of corruption or unethical activity. However, while DDoS attacks have

been used to disrupt the services of companies and institutions as large and intimidating as the World Trade Organization, Visa, MasterCard, and various local and international political bodies, and despite being labeled by some as acts of terrorism, for many advocates of more conventional forms of protest such as sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, rallies, and strikes, DDoS attacks and similar forms of online activism are dismissed as "slacktivism," that is to say, as a symptom of an overall decline of interest in "real" forms of protest and civil disobedience (ibid, 2-7; 39-40).

Sauter cites popular writer Malcolm Gladwell, tech-writer Evgeny Morozov, and influential hacker Oxblood Ruffin, as each presenting in one form or another a critique of DDoS attacks as being lazy and lacking the heroism and dedication of the actions of "real" forms of civil disobedience and protest, as is to be found, for example, in the actions of civil rights activists from the mid-twentieth century (ibid, 5-6). Sauter argues that the rejection of "hacktivism" that we find in the work of such commentators result primarily from their prior commitment to a certain notion of civil disobedience (ibid, 5-6). On Sauter's account, since at least the writings of Henry David Thoreau, civil disobedience has been wedded to some notion of personal risk, insofar as the possibility of punishment, and the acceptance of such a punishment, is intrinsically linked to the traditional conception of strategic acts of civil disobedience (ibid, 19-22). Sauter argues that for figures such as Thoreau or Martin Luther King, the public performance of one's commitment to resistance and the public display of the state's intolerance of such resistant behaviour are integral components of the conventional notion of civil disobedience (ibid, 19-22). Spending time in prison, being physically accosted by police, and making a public display of one's commitment to a cause are conventionally understood to be inseparable from the activity of resistance, insofar as the resistant action is conventionally understood as opening others up to the possibility that they themselves might one day hold such convictions, and opening others up to the oppressive character of the state. Such a performance of resistant action is largely absent from DDoS attacks and other forms of "hacktivism," insofar as the latter is primarily done anonymously and with the intention of causing disruptions that impact the target without necessarily disrupting the life of the activist. As Sauter argues, it is largely the absence of direct confrontation, and what seems to be an unwillingness to expose oneself to state

oppression or violence, that leads commentators to view "hacktivism" as a cowardly, lazy, and apathetic form of pseudo-resistance (ibid, 5-7).

Given such popular conceptions of online or virtual forms of activism and their withdrawn, dull, and often non-confrontational appearance, it is perhaps understandable that *The Matrix* focuses so little on depictions of computer hacking. Indeed, while *The Matrix* opts for depictions of both enacting and withstanding physical violence as the means of embodying the protagonists' commitment to their resistance, the film's willingness to depict hacking in a mundane and often unexciting manner sits at odds with its conventional depiction in film and television. The conventional depiction of computer hacking in popular films such as *Hackers*, *Mission Impossible*, or *GoldenEye* are often laughable in their attempts to reintroduce the sense of bodily risk, violence, and intensity that is conventionally associated with traditional acts of civil disobedience. Such filmic depictions of hacking often involve the need for protagonists to fight their way through virtual spaces that are game-like in their need for dynamic kinetic movement. Perhaps the scene most famous for its absurdity in this regard is the episode "The Bone Yard" from the popular crime television series *NCIS*, in which the protagonists encounter, in real-time, a hacker who is disrupting their server so brilliantly that it requires two people to simultaneously and frenetically type away at a single computer terminal's keyboard. While it could reasonably be argued that such depictions of computer hacking aim at simply making a dull action appear more entertaining, the prevalence of such depictions of hacking—which present hacking as akin to an embodied and dangerous stand-off between two enemies, as opposed to a protracted, clandestine, and withdrawn activity that is largely without a sense of immediate danger—function to reproduce and reinforce the commonplace that resistant behaviour is a form of arduous and kinetic labour through which one performs one's commitment to resistance.

For Sauter, such an idealized notion of resistance functions ultimately to "stifle innovation within social movements and political action, while at the same time cultivating a deep and unproductive nostalgia for a kind of 'ideal activism' that never existed" (22-3). Following Sauter's argument, it is difficult to see how the cultivation of willingly resistant subjects who question authority, engage in the disruption of systemic forms of oppression, and produce forms of emancipation, would benefit from attempts by other activists to police and shame those others who

don't conform to an "image of resistance" that has been left largely unquestioned. Indeed, the success of a film like *The Matrix*, which sees the struggle over a virtual space that we are repeatedly told is not encumbered by the physical limitations of the "real world," seems to rest partly on this reproduction and confirmation of resistance as an embodied activity that must be open to the possibility of inflicting or withstanding violence. Whether it is through the depiction of violent action sequences, or ludicrous depictions of hackers as Glenn Gould-esque keyboard virtuosos, the conventional depiction of anti-establishment resistant behaviour is one that is codified by signifiers of exciting kinetic action.

Central to the protagonist's capacity to be resistant to the almost global systems of control that are represented by the matrix itself, and the militarized robots that patrol the world outside of the matrix, is the struggle to obtain and maintain a sense of optimism in an increasingly threatening and despairing situation. Early in the first *Matrix* film Neo learns that his journey towards becoming "The One" will entail an incredible sense of self-belief and an almost absolute confidence in his capacity to change things. In a scene in which Neo and Morpheus fight one another in a kind of kung fu sparring simulation, Morpheus comments that Neo's inability to strike him does not derive from a lack of physical ability so much as his inability to truly believe that he has the capacity to do so. Being in a virtual environment, Morpheus reminds Neo that what seemed like impositions in the "real world"—i.e., the matrix—are merely habitual injunctions that can be bent to one's will, if not completely overcome. Frustrated with Neo's inability to overcome such habitual limitations Morpheus demands, "what are you waiting for? You're faster than this. Don't think you are, know you are. Come on. Stop trying to hit me and hit me." This trope of Neo's need to overcome his perceived limitations and to truly embrace himself and his powers reoccurs throughout the film. Indeed, moments after this fight simulation completes itself Neo is taken to another simulation in which, atop of a skyscraper, he is asked to leap an immense distance towards a tower that stands directly opposed to him. The test is a literalization of the religious and existential notion of the "leap of faith" whereupon Neo must overcome all sense of self-doubt and pessimism regarding his abilities in order to achieve the seemingly impossible. Before successfully making the impossible leap between the two skyscrapers, Morpheus explains, "you have to let it all go, Neo: Fear, doubt, and disbelief. Free your mind." The phenomena of "fear,

doubt, and disbelief" are thus characterized as being the true enemies that inhibit Neo's capacity to radically resist the forces of violence and control that will seek to prevent him from freeing others inside of the matrix. Moreover, over the course of the first *Matrix* film we find a series of interlinked moments of self-belief and belief-in-The-One—that is to say, Neo—that drive the main narrative arc. Morpheus has absolute faith in his capacity to find The One, and has absolute faith in The One's capacity to deliver salvation. Such a sense of optimism in his own powers and the powers of Neo are offset against Neo's and Trinity's interlinked journeys of self discovery where they overcome their doubts, fears, and inhibitions and arrive at an unshakable sense of conviction. Indeed, the optimistic phenomenon of love is central to Neo's acceptance of his status as The One. Towards the end of the first film, dying in the "real world" as a result of multiple gunshot wounds in the matrix, Neo is reborn in Trinity's love for him when she utters,

> Neo, I'm not afraid anymore. The Oracle told me that I would fall in love and that that man... the man that I loved would be The One. So you see, you can't be dead. You can't be...because I love you. You hear me? I love you. Now get up!

Rather than a desperate lamentation at the direction events have taken—at the seeming inevitability of Neo's death at the hands of agent Smith—Trinity's confession of her love for Neo and of her absence of fear lead up to a confident command that Neo be reborn, that he too must abandon fear and embrace the love that Trinity feels. On being issued such a command Neo is finally reborn as "The One"—the prophetic figure that he had been all along but had been too inhibited by fear and doubt to fully affirm. Time and time again in *The Matrix*, therefore, we find an association between resistance and the joyous dispostion of optimism. Moments before Neo is reborn, agent Smith smugly refers to his bloody "corpse" as being "merely human," as being frail and finite in comparison to the seemingly unstoppable and infinite network of control that the machines effectively are. However, the frailty and finitude of humanity is sublimated by the capacity for the human to maintain absolute convictions through fundamentally optimistic attitudes. Optimism is characterized throughout the film as being one of the constitutive conditions for resistance, and, this constitutive nature is made no more explicit than in the scenes where we learn of the protagonists' betrayal at the hands of their assumed ally Cypher.

For Badiou, what is at stake in *The Matrix* is the capacity *"to endure the ordeal of the real faced with semblance"* (*Cinema*, 200). It is this component of the film that gives it, on Badiou's account, its properly Platonic character, insofar as the real struggle is not just to see the truth—to leave the cave of illusion and semblance as the famous Platonic fable goes—but, furthermore, to be able to return to the cave, and to those still enamored by semblance and illusion, and to be able to survive despite the indifference and hostility that one will be faced with. To be properly resistant is not simply to refuse the semblance that has been offered as truth, but to be able to endure a disenchanted real in the face of the possibility of slipping back into the comfort of semblance. The character Cypher represents a betrayal of this injunction to remain optimistic and faithful to the possibility of resistance in the face of a terrifying and despairing "real." The "real" that exists outside of the semblances of the matrix, as Morpheus reminds us, is likened to a desert—a barren and inhospitable world that seems to be at utterly at odds with the possibility of human survival. Despite being faced with such a hopeless wasteland, Trinity, Morpheus, and Neo each in their own way maintain and in fact intensify their faith in one another and in the common cause of emancipating themselves from the grips of machinic control and manipulation. Cypher, on the other hand, who is presented alongside the "agents" as being one of the principal villains of the first film, harbours a pessimistic view of the resistance's cause, and seems to be in a state of mourning for the passed tranquility of his life inside the matrix. During the height of his betrayal, in which Cypher colludes with the agents to deliver Morpheus over to the machines, he confesses to Trinity his pessimistic outlook on their shared existence, stating, "I'm tired, Trinity. Tired of this war, tired of fighting...I'm tired of the ship, being cold, eating the same goddamn goop everyday..." The mundane phenomenon of fatigue here again presents unpalatable, cast as part of what drives Cypher to betray his comrades and as being antithetical to the optimistic spirit of resistance. Indeed, it is through the pessimistic figure of Cypher, and through the contrasting of the extraordinary phenomenon of optimism with the mundane phenomena of fatigue and despair that the links between optimism and resistance and further mythologized.

There are, of course, good reasons why it might seem impossible to conceive of engaging in modes of resistance without some kind of optimistic attachment to a desire for change. Indeed, as Lauren Berlant states in *Cruel Optimism*, "all

attachments are optimistic" even if their immediate effects do not *feel* optimistic (23).
This is to say that, for Berlant, all attachments involve a movement towards
something other, something that we perceive as being outside or beyond us, and thus
all attachments involve an optimistic affirmation of this otherness (ibid, 1-2).
However, Berlant argues that it is precisely this coincidence of attachment and
optimism that often prevents us from dislocating ourselves from attachments that are
ultimately harmful to us, a form of attachment that Berlant refers to as "cruel
optimism" (ibid, 1-3; 20-1). For Berlant, a sense of cruel optimism pervades any
attachment that the subject views as being necessary to their being, and yet ultimately
causes them a great deal of harm (ibid, 1-3; 20). The most paradigmatic example of
this attachment is, on Berlant's account, the "moral-intimate-economic thing called
'the good life'" (ibid, 2). Despite the clear "instability, fragility, and dear costs" of
many of our attachments—such as "families, political systems, institutions,
markets"—Berlant argues that we maintain a sense of optimism that often limits our
capacity to encounter an otherwise that could prove ultimately to be of benefit (ibid,
2; 40). The question that Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" raises, therefore, is
what political otherwise, or what modes of resistance, could be engaged if we were to
suspend—even temporarily—the attachments that we have to certain "images of
resistance." If certain attachments, or certain shared spaces of optimism, ultimately
harm us and impede our capacity to make new attachments, could there not be some
political and emancipatory potential in a suspension of optimism and attachment as
ideal—even if this is momentary or fleeting?

Queer theorist Lee Edelman explores just this possibility in his text *No Future,*
in which he pursues the goal of providing a theoretical account of a queer politics
unbound from conventional attachments to a futurity promised in the figure of the
child. Edelman's account suggests that our present capacity for envisioning alternate
notions of politics—that is to say, alternate ways of organizing ourselves and of
being—is impeded by the hegemony of the child as a symbol of a heteronormative
social order's infinite capacity to redeem itself (2-3). For Edelman, the figure of the
child and the kind of futurity that the figure of the child can promise us is
fundamental for the mobilization of our political fantasies. That is to say, our
ultimately groundless and foundationless political ideals require some connection to

the promise of rebirth, renewal, and redemption, all of which is conventionally found in the figure of the child (ibid, 2-3). As Edelman states,

> politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention. (ibid, 2-3)

The futurity that the child embodies is, however, not the kind of open and unknowable future that is affirmed in the works of Caputo and Derrida—as was discussed in the previous chapter. Instead, what seems to trouble Edelman about the function of the figure of the child as that which demarcates the horizon of the political—or the limits of our capacity to organize ourselves and comport ourselves differently—is the extent to which this figuration of the child is always strongly determined by certain present normativities. Indeed, while the myth of the child as a blank slate—an embodiment of the possibility for a social organization to overcome its prejudices and tendencies towards violence—pervades much of Western culture, Foucault reminds us saliently in *Discipline and Punish* of the extent to which children are increasingly individuated through regimes of power (193). Foucault's insight that the more that disciplinary power is exerted on a group the more that group will be individuated only seems more prescient the greater the anxiety about effective parenting grows. While we like to think of children as largely pre-individuated and therefore untouched by cultural prejudices, it is more common to find portrayals of the blank slate of adulthood within our cultural imaginary—particularly the office worker "drone," devoid of a particular character, grey and plastic in his or her absence of will and malleability in the hands of different regimes of management. The figure of the child, on the other hand, increasingly functions as a site for anxiety-riddled attempts at intervening into the future, in the form of needing to determine what a child's future will consist of, what schooling and extracurricular activities will be necessary to pursue such a life, what phenomena the child should come into contact with, etc. This is to say that, while the figure of the child functions as that subject on behalf of whom our interventions are enacted—"a better world for our children," "a brighter tomorrow for future generations," etc.—the condition for the possibility of such interventions is a process of increasing determination. Or, as Phillip Larkin put it in his poem "This be the Verse,"

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself. (*Philip Larkin: Poems*, 69)

The challenge that the concluding lines of Larkin's poem pose is aligned with the theoretical difficulty offered by Berlant and Edelman, insofar as all three raise the question of how we are to have hope for a future without becoming subjugated by this very hope. It is possible that, as Franco Berardi argues, our attachment to mobilizing political slogans and idealizations such as Barack Obama's "Yes we can" from the 2008 American presidential election are a symptom of our precise inability to endure our present political attachments (*After the Future*, 148). This is effectively to say that, whilst optimism cannot be entirely avoided, there is a sense in which our increased attachments to certain political formations—whether this is understood in terms of political ideals, models, parties, or even individual politicians—can evince a failure of those attachments themselves. Indeed, perhaps the ever-greater emphasis on children as an embodiment of a better and brighter future results from a disavowed sense of the malignancy and failure of our political attachments. However, the possibility of conceiving of and therefore in some sense grasping alternatives to our present political attachments is inhibited by the sense that conviction and optimism are fundamentally resistant gestures. The characterization of pessimism and despair as complicit with authority and control, as is depicted in *The Matrix*'s antagonist Cypher, functions to intensify such associations. While Cypher is one of the few characters who openly questions the overall movement of the plot as the struggle to leave the matrix, we are quickly reminded of the insidious nature of such a figure. Cypher's pessimism is associated with selfishness, weakness, and a counter-revolutionary (lack of) spirit, all qualities that prevent him from making the kinds of sacrifices necessary to bring the matrix to a state of balance and equilibrium, as Neo does in the conclusion of the third film. Moments before the final credits roll in the second sequel, a computer program who symbolizes the "new" matrix as a place of peace and harmony between man and machine, arrives in the form of a child and gestures towards the glowing sunrise that it has created in Neo's honour.

While we can argue that the protagonists' valiant resistance of the machinations of control that conspire against them in the *Matrix* trilogy takes the form of incisive and ever intensifying actions, it is ultimately the production of a balanced

and harmonious world that these actions aim towards. While it might seem that the ultimate goal of Neo, Trinity, Morpheus, and a host of other resistance fighters is to absolutely emancipate humanity from out of the clutches of cybernetic enslavement, at various stages throughout the three films the notion of some primal and originary state of balance is introduced as being inseparable from the very sense of humanity that these protagonists hope to restore. Through both the testimony of Agent Smith and the enigmatic "architect"—the computer program who claims responsibility for designing the matrix—we learn that the origins of the matrix are to be found in the failed implementation of utopian paradise—simulated worlds devoid of suffering and yet which proved to be ultimately disastrous as no human subject would accept them as real. As Agent Smith explains to Morpheus in the first film:

> Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered, where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost. Some believed we lacked the programming language to describe your perfect world. But I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through suffering and misery. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from. Which is why the Matrix was redesigned to this: the peak of your civilization.

The machine's utopian world is rejected by humanity because it lacks the "natural" balance of pleasure and pain, of suffering and solace that is posited as necessary for humans to accept their surroundings. Later in this monologue Smith describes the human race as being like a viral infection, moving from ecosystem to ecosystem while continually consuming and destroying any possibility of a harmonious balance that could sustain them. For Smith, the human race, whilst itself dependent on a balanced environment in order to survive, cannot help but destroy such environments until it simply wipes itself out. The matrix, then, appears strangely to save humanity from its apocalyptic state by entering it into a kind of passive equilibrium, with each human consuming less energy than it produces in the stable bio-stasis of the matrix. But, like all balanced and harmonious environments that humans come into contact with, the stability of the matrix is put at risk by the resistant few who seek to free humanity from their collective delusion inside the matrix. While it is Agent Smith who ultimately threatens the future of both the machines and the millions upon millions of humans living inside the virtual world when, in the sequels, he takes the form of an almost cancerous infestation of the matrix—endlessly reproducing himself until he poses the possibility of the collapse of the very system itself—such a shift in

his functioning—from regulator and protector of the matrix to a volatile force that threatens its very existence—only occurs after Smith is "infected" by Neo's humanity. Once infected, not only does Smith diverge from his original programming—beginning to pursue selfish goals that do not benefit the system overall—but he also begins to enact the very trait he attributed to humanity insofar as he begins to consume and destroy the matrix through his self replication. Tragically, therefore, it seems that humanity is destined to destroy the very balance and harmony that it desperately needs and that it continually strives for, since, in becoming merely a stable unit within a broader system—as the pod-bound humans of the matrix are—humans lose their very humanity. Such a pessimistic view is undone, however, in the conclusion of the final *Matrix* film when we learn that Neo has managed to restore not only the matrix but also peace between humanity and the machines. Through sacrificing himself Neo is able to defeat agent Smith and to allow for the matrix to reset. In the concluding moments of the film we learn from the architect that in the ensuing version of the matrix the humans who wish to leave will be allowed to, and, therefore, not only is the matrix's internal balance restored through Neo's sacrifice, but, furthermore, a sense of balance and harmony is reached between the film's two warring factions.

The hope for a harmonious world where different factions—whether they be religious groups, people of different political persuasions, or distinct cultures—enjoy a balanced degree of power and responsibility is a political desire that seems to be ubiquitous in its relation to images of resistance. If the possibility of such a balanced and harmonious world of consensus and mutual respect is not possible, then for many the question of the ultimate aims of diverse political projects associated with the resistance of established and dominant notions of politics would need to be seriously readdressed. However, for contemporary political philosopher Chantal Mouffe it is precisely this desire for a harmonious post-political world of consensus, one ultimately devoid of the possibility of antagonism, that needs to be critiqued (*The Democratic Paradox*, 100). For Mouffe, the contemporary notion of a political configuration that lacks clear distinctions between left and right parties—or "third way" politics, as it has been known since Tony Blair's championing of the phrase—is deeply ideological insofar as it presents the hegemony of a particular political ordering as a neutral space for deliberation that is entirely without antagonism (ibid,

100). Following Mouffe's account, the presentation of third way politics as a sign of our intellectual and political maturity has merely served to mask the extent to which the prevailing "neutral" space of politics can only function by excluding other ideas, groups, and voices (111-2). For example, Mouffe argues that despite being told that they live in the time of the "radical centre"—a time in which the political landscape has increasingly moved away from ideological positions and has moved towards the neutrality of market based approaches—women are still underrepresented and underpaid in contemporary Western societies (ibid, 112). In order for women to gain political power, Mouffe argues, men would simply have to lose or forfeit some of their own—how else can female representatives assume a greater number of positions of power? And yet, while support for the rights and struggles of women has become a kind of political common sense, the consensus based approach to politics has no room for such antagonisms, and, furthermore, sees discrimination and forms of political subordination as being minor problems that are slowly being phased out through the deliberative mechanisms of the modern liberal democracy (ibid, 112). For Mouffe, however, the hegemony of patriarchy only serves as one example of the way in which major antagonisms still exist, and require criticism, within society. Yet despite their persistence and significance, for Mouffe such antagonisms are increasingly effaced through the ideology of consensus.

Indeed, Mouffe has argued in her text *On the Political* that the emergence of populist political parties with worrying far-right tendencies needs to be interpreted, not in terms of the failures of a kind of relativistic postmodern political discourse in which fascism becomes a difference that must be a least affirmed in the sense of being included in debate, but, instead, in terms of the consequences of the disappearance of significant distinctions between left and right wing factions of mainstream politics (64-5). Mouffe states that when we "examine the state of democratic politics in all the countries where right-wing populism has made serious inroads" we find a strikingly similar situation in that "their growth has always taken place in circumstances where the differences between the traditional democratic parties have become much less significant than before" (ibid, 66). For Mouffe, such a state of consensus between what traditionally would have been a clear divide between left and right parties produces a situation in which radical right-wing parties can emerge as "anti-establishment parties," political parties that appear to present the only avenue for

voters to dissent in a representational system that moves closer towards a central consensus (ibid, 67-8). Furthermore, and as Mouffe has argued in her more recent work, *Agonistics,* the conventional response from centralist democratic parties has not been to engage these far-right political parties in debates, nor to affirm them as a point of difference from this political centre. Instead, such far right parties have been condemned by way of the mobilization of a thoroughly moralistic discourse that positions the "good" mainstream against the "bad" and "deviant" political other (142). As Mouffe argues, this moralistic discourse is mobilized both when democracies are threatened from without—for instance by Islamic extremists—or whether they are threatened from within by extreme left- or right-wing political parties (ibid, 142). The problem with such an approach, Mouffe argues, is that it helps us to understand very little about the conditions that cause such groups to arise in the first place, and it ultimately adds to their own popularity as "anti-establishment" factions (ibid, 142-3; *On the Political*, 66-8). Therefore, on Mouffe's account, one of the dangers faced by the contemporary political configurations of Western democracies is the extent to which the dream of a neutral space of consensus will engender an increasingly moral discourse regarding those excluded from such a space. Indeed, it is for this reason that Mouffe states, "coming to terms with the constitutive nature of power implies relinquishing the ideal of a democratic society as the realization of a perfect harmony or transparency" (*The Democratic Paradox*, 100).

However, despite the malignancies of such a "democratic consensus"—a consensus that has been used as a justification for the recent military occupation of the Middle East, for the suspension of civil liberties across Europe, America, Britain and Australia, and for the production and implementation of international mass-surveillance systems—it is in the name of both maintaining and furthering such a consensus, such a purportedly harmonious system of non-ideological market mechanisms, that much popular political discourse is mobilized. For example, and as the queer theorist Michael O'Rourke has argued, a highly visible challenge for contemporary feminists has been the struggle to maintain the diversity of the discourses that have emerged online—through platforms like "blogs, twitter, instagram, vine, snapchat," etc.—with an injunction to maintain a harmonious and transparent sense of what it means to be a feminist ("Belle Knox, Peri-carity and the Future of the Humanities," n.p.). O'Rourke uses the example of Belle Knox, a

contemporary pornstar and undergraduate student of women's studies at Duke University, who became notorious in the public eye due to her young age and her discussion of pornographic acting as being compatible with contemporary feminist politics (ibid, n.p.). As O'Rourke argues, Knox's right to claim feminist status has been largely critiqued in the public arena of social media by a host of feminists who feel the need to shame and discourage Knox due to her choice of work (ibid, n.p.). These feminists engage in what O'Rourke has called "Mean Girl Feminism," a kind of feminist politics that "adjudicates and moralizes about who is in and who is out" and that deliberates on "who can be a feminist and who cannot" (ibid, n.p.). One of the central points of contention between Knox and many feminists is Knox's open discussion of her enjoyment of sexual acts that may be considered by some as violent or degrading (ibid, n.p.). What is interesting about the attempt to exclude Knox, and her attempts to create links between broader feminist struggles and the particular struggle that she has encountered as a sex worker, is the sense in which such "Mean Girls Feminism" appears to locate as one of its goals a transparent understanding of what "feminism" means—one that is not problematized by competing interpretations of its fundamental terms—and a harmonious state of consensus between feminists that functions through the exclusion of figures like Knox. Such a tendency to police what counts as resistance—whether it be the critique of feminists who work in pornography or hackers who use DDoS attacks as a means for civil disobedience—appears to be connected to a desire for harmony and transparency and a moralistic demarcation of a resistant "inside" that is defined through its outward exclusion of everything that is presently unrecognizable as resistance.

The point of the preceding analysis, then, is not to show that the repetition of the tropes of "action," "optimism," and "balance" which can be found in the *Matrix* film trilogy is indicative of the film's complicity with hegemony. Nor is it to suggest that there is no counter-hegemonic potential in these aforementioned values or strategies. Instead, the point is simply to demonstrate the links that exist between popular representations of resistance and a set of presuppositions about the "nature" of resistance that contribute to the exclusion of other terms in the theorization of resistance. These "images of resistance" that work in the background of the conceptualizing of possible counter-hegemonic strategies are both unavoidable and yet dangerous if allowed to foreclose the undecidability of the very terms with which

they operate. Again, this is not to argue that there is a need to move away from conceptualizations of resistance that emphasize notions of action, optimism, and balance. It is rather to suggest that "perhaps" certain phenomena, traditionally conceived pejoratively as antithetical to these aforementioned terms, such as "laziness," "pessimism," and "excess," have a certain quotidian and everyday quality that can lead to their exclusion from conceptions of emancipatory politics. This is not to say that pessimism, for example, is somehow more everyday or ubiquitous than optimism. Instead, the point is that, while we could speak of an optimism and a pessimism that belongs to the everyday, our "images of resistance" have a capacity to support the possibility of rare moments of heroic optimism, militant action, and utopian balance, that are in some sense extraordinary and exceptional, and therefore antithetical to the everyday. Such a privileging of the extraordinary, as can be found in popular culture as well as in the philosophy of major contemporary figures such as Badiou and Žižek, presents the pessimism, laziness, and excess of everyday life under late capitalism in pejorative terms and therefore as inadmissible to the thinking of "true" emancipatory politics. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what "heroic pessimism," "militant laziness," and "utopian excess" could possibly mean. Therefore, what is being proposed here is the significance of both acknowledging the heterogeneous nature of the plurality of struggles that are currently being fought the world over, and the value of the disposition of "perhaps" for cultivating a means for particular struggles to enter into non-moralistic dialogues with each other, even if these dialogues can never be brought to a satisfactory level of synthesis or consensus. That is to say, if we begin from an acknowledgement of the plurality of struggles that occur, then appropriate response to such a plurality must be an openness to that which is unforeseeable in resistance, and to the possibility of avering those quotidian phenomena that are seemingly too base, mundane, or ordinary to be of any political value, and to affirm them as potential forms of resistance nevertheless.

Such an approach introduces the question of how and to what extent the discourses of philosophy, critical theory, or cultural studies can act as a form of resistance without beginning from the identification of a subjugated non-resistant group or concept that requires those disciplines to convert it into a properly resistant historical subject. If those forms of contemporary philosophy that attempt to think through the possibility of resistance hope to avoid becoming another form of

subjugation that articulates its own necessity and dominance through its representation of an external state of non-resistance, then what modes of thought are open to it? With this question in mind, the investigative thrust of this thesis inevitably shifts to exploring the possibilities that can be opened up by critiquing—by way of learning to say "perhaps" to apparently impossible forms of resistance—the seemingly natural and necessary status of any "image of resistance." Accordingly, the following chapters seek to engage with the ways in which existential and conceptual possibilities are narrowed by the ideological nature of the subjective positions that are offered to us in the modern world. Against the contemporary image of resistance, each of the three chapters to come examines the undecidable nature of these aforementioned binary oppositions for forming stable and assured notions of resistance. Thus, against the affirmation of "action," "optimism," and "balance" as key virtues in the politics of resistance, the discussion now turns to phenomena conventionally understood as impediments to resistance—"excess," "laziness," and "pessimism"—to examine them as potential sites of contamination and displacement. In view of the spirit of "perhaps," however, the challenge is to consider whether each of these dispositions can be affirmed not for its potential to replace the political value it seems to oppose, but, instead, as a means of creating agonistic tensions between the very terms of resistance, so as to articulate the space for unforeseen and still other possibilities for resistance.

Chapter Four:

Excess and Balance: Too Much of a Good Thing?

Often it seems that we live in an excessive world prone to extremes. As Eugene Thacker states in his text *In the Dust of this Planet*, the contemporary world appears increasingly unthinkable as it approaches the brink of unimaginable crisis and horror, evinced by "planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always looming, threat of extinction" (1). The French anthropologist Marc Augé speaks to a similar sense of a contemporary world characterized by excess and unintelligibility when, in his text *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* he argues that our present age has seen the rise of an overabundance of events that bombard the public through global media networks (29). Such an overabundance, he argues, produces a situation in which the world becomes unintelligible and incoherent, and, as a response to this the inhabitants of a "supermodern" world are drawn into the endless and excessive production of meanings to paper over the lack of a shared sense of the world (ibid, 29). This endless drive to give meaning to the past and present is, on Augé's account, simply another feature of the world's incoherence and overabundance, a world whose "essential quality" is "excess" (ibid, 29). Thacker's and Augé's comments seem to resonate with a contemporary discussion of our present situation as being a place of both too much and too little—too much poverty, violence, and horror; too little peace, equality, and decency—where the only reasonable assumption about the future is that things are going to get worse. Indeed, and as the contemporary psychoanalyst Adam Phillips remarks, if, following the historian Eric Hobsbawm, the twentieth century was the "age of extremes" then "the twenty-first century looks like being the age of excess" (*On Balance*, 2). Excess appears to permeate all elements of our culture and ecology, from the excesses of our increasing global population to the immensity of our collective carbon footprint, from the excesses of Western consumerism to the excess of global debt. Excess is perhaps, then, simply an unavoidable—yet also an impermissible—feature of the contemporary.

The excess of consumption and debt that occurs in the "developed world" runs parallel to the excess of poverty that can be found on the rest of the planet. As the journalist Gary Leech writes in his text *Capitalism: A Structural Genocide*, "capital's internal logic forces it to expand to every corner of the globe, and the resulting inequality and deprivation of basic needs for billions of people are inherent components of capitalism" (5). These billions of people that Leech refers to are, of course, not primarily located within the "first world" but are instead part of the exploited global south whose ways of life and quality of life are radically disrupted— if not destroyed—by the expansion of capital (ibid, 3-5). In this text, Leech provides a horrifying account of the conditions under which some 216,500 Indian farmers committed suicide between 1997 and 2009, and links this unthinkable death rate to the expansion of globalization and the dominance of international "agribusiness" into India (ibid, 55-7). The emergence of the World Trade Organization and the implementation of the agreement on "Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights" in the 1990s created a pretext for the expansion of agribusiness into India and the selling of patented genetically modified seed crop to Indian farmers (ibid, 58). While the purchase of genetically modified seed crops by Indian farmers was done largely on the basis of entering into the global market, and almost exclusively involved acquiring enormous amounts of debt in order to do so, farmers were promised that the annual purchase of specialized fertilizers, pesticides, and seeds would not constitute a significant financial burden because of great increases in revenue from larger seed yields (ibid, 59). However, when the larger seed yields did not materialize the farmers were "forced to borrow more money to cover their losses and to purchase new seeds in order to plant the following year's crop, thus initiating a downward spiral that has led them deeper into debt every year" (ibid, 59). Seeing no way out of crippling debt a staggering number of farmers have turned to suicide, with in 2009 more than 17,000 seeing no other choice than to take their own lives, and many, Leech reports, doing so by drinking the pesticides sold to them by the same international agribusinesses that sold them genetically modified seed (ibid, 60-1). For Leech, such immense suffering and death is not an accidental feature of the system of global capitalism, but is, instead, part of what he refers to as capitalism's tendency towards a "structural genocide"—i.e., mass suffering and death that is structurally built into the system itself—that can be evinced in India, Mexico, and sub-Saharan Africa. On Leech's account, the system of globalism tends towards two kinds of excess: on the one hand

immense amounts of wealth can be generated for the "developed world" by offsetting loses through causing excessive suffering, misery, and death in the "underdeveloped" global south (ibid, 3-5).

Given the effects of the excesses that our world appears prone to, who in good faith could possibly defend the notion of excess—sing its praises or extol its worth? Conventionally it appears that only the most insidious apologist for the horrors of global capitalism could possibly argue that excess is something we need—usually by appealing to a mythical "trickle-down effect" of wealth or by declaring that "greed is good!" Indeed, in response to the excesses of modern life in the Western world, a host of anti-excess manifestos and movements have emerged that declare a need to spend less, consume less, to live more humbly, more traditionally, and more naturally by developing more sustainable, slower, and authentic connections to our environments and our selves. While such movements are indeed heterogeneous and diverse they are part of what we can call a decelerationist response to global capitalism, a trend towards making life more stable and harmonious *against* the capitalist injunction to accelerate and intensify the excesses of our lives and our world. In a world that appears to be spiraling out of control, lacking a centre towards which things can gravitate stably, the trend towards decelerating appears to have the characteristics of what Jacques Derrida has referred to as a "saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty" thinking that emerges through an inability to affirm a world without absolute origin, stability, or presence ("Structure, Sign and Play," 369). Against this thinking Derrida discusses a mode of radical affirmationist thought that can affirm the "*noncentre otherwise than a loss of the centre,*" a thought that "plays without security" and is open to the difference of the otherwise and the alternative (ibid, 369). What we will explore in this chapter is the possibility that this decelerationist thinking—of which the major contemporary manifestation is the "slow movement"—privileges the chance of a return to a once existent stability, authenticity, and sense of balance, at the cost of excluding the very alternatives to our present situation that we lack and desperately need. In dreaming of stability and balance we run the risk of determining the present as an absolute horizon that cannot be radically challenged, but only marginally reformed. And by nostalgically dreaming of a return to a past authenticity we run the risk of excluding the very differences from and in our present situation that surely are necessary for any change to occur. Therefore, in order to approach our

present situation without falling into a guilty and nostalgic mode of thought we need to attempt a radical rethinking of excess and our relationship to it; to pose the possibility of an openness to a notion of excess as otherwise than simply opposed to some notion of a prior harmony, balance, or stable ordering.

Contemporary capitalism is often discussed as being underpinned by logics of utility and productivity that tend towards the procurement of further intensifications of production and usefulness. It therefore appears to be caught in a process of self-justification wherein the "necessity" of further degrees of productivity and utility are grounded simply in an ideology of growth, and growth is itself understood in terms of productivity and utility. The need for exponential growth produces the need for endless states of further acceleration, and this drive towards greater velocities has given rise to a diverse range of counter-movements that attempt to grapple with the seemingly endless mutations of life under global capitalism. If, as the cultural critic and theorist Benjamin Noys states, "speed is the problem"—insofar as we are subjected to the "accelerating demand that we innovate more, work more, enjoy more, produce more, and consume more" (*Malign Velocities*, x)—then for some the contemporary interest in deceleration and the possibilities offered by disregarded customs and practices has emerged as a measure of reducing excess. Indeed, while a certain sense of excess is absolutely key for Badiou's thinking of the "event," it seems that the excess of the event, thought against the "situation," cannot be made commensurable with the broader notion of the excessive change and speed of capitalism. Badiou writes that

> our world is marked by its speed: the speed of historical change; the speed of technical change; the speed of communications; of transmissions; and even the speed with which human beings establish connections with one another. This speed exposes us to the danger of a very great incoherency. It is because things, images and relations circulate so quickly that we do not even have time to measure the extent of this incoherency [...] Philosophy must propose a retardation process. It must construct a time for thought, which, in the face of the injunction to speed, will constitute a time of its own. I consider a singularity of philosophy; that its thinking is leisurely, because today revolt requires leisureliness and not speed. This thinking, slow and consequently rebellious, is alone capable of establishing the fixed point, whatever it may be, whatever its name may be, which we need in order to sustain the desire of philosophy. (*Infinite Thought*, 38)

While the centrality of philosophy to the critique of the speed of capitalism is not widely accepted outside of arguments made by figures like Badiou, there is certainly a

sense in which his association between "revolt" and a notion of "leisureliness," as the inverse of speed, can be traced through a much wider set of conversations. For example, the journalist Carl Honoré, author of the book *In Praise of Slow* suggests that we have become entranced by what he refers to as the "go-faster gospel" from which the solution to the demands of an accelerated culture prone to excess is simply to accelerate further: "falling behind at work? Get a quicker Internet connection. No time for that novel you got at Christmas? Learn to speed-read. Diet not working? Try liposuction. Too busy to cook? Buy a microwave" (*In Praise of Slow*, 4). For Honoré the most immediate symptom of this will towards acceleration is the ever-increasing problem of overwork, stating that empirical evidence points to a trend of employees in America refusing to take time off work when sick or when they have amassed large amounts of paid leave due to their excessive work loads (ibid, 5). Honoré points towards Japan as one of the most extreme illustrations of the problem of overwork where the term "*karoshi*"—literally meaning "death by overwork"—has emerged out of the phenomena of hundreds of Japanese citizens dying from work related stress every year (ibid, 5-6). Indeed, the ever increasing demands for people to work longer hours and to increase their productivity appears to have emerged at the same time as a booming stimulant industry that can promise to eradicate the limitations that sleep deprivation and general fatigue induce. The predominance of caffeinated products— manifested in an increasing consumer interest in specialty coffee, energy drinks such as Red Bull, Mother, and Monster (to name only a handful of the vast array of energy drinks that currently saturate the market) and other forms of stimulant-riddled consumables such as caffeinated chocolate and soap—has become almost entirely normalized within contemporary culture. So dominant is this culture that the trope of coffee or other forms of caffeine as a necessary part of one's day has become almost unavoidable.

Against this apparent onslaught of speed, acceleration, and intensification, a host of trends have emerged that look to put the breaks on our excessive consumerist culture. Honoré argues that the lure of slowness, simplicity, calmness, and care are enticing more and more people away from the electric whirr of the daily grind. He states that

> in the workplace, millions are pushing for—and winning—a better balance
> between work and life. In the bedroom, people are discovering the joys of
> slow sex, through Tantra and other forms of erotic deceleration. The notion

that slower is better underlies the boom in exercise regimes—from yoga to Tai Chi—and alternative medicines—from herbalism to homeopathy—that take a gentle, holistic approach to the body. Cities everywhere are revamping the urban landscape to encourage people to drive less and walk more. (ibid, 14)

There has been a veritable boom in the application of slowness to divergent domains over the last few decades. Honoré speaks of the emergence of the Japanese "Sloth Club," the American "Long-Now Foundation," the European "Society for the Deceleration of Time," the "slow education" movement in the United States, and the "slow city" movement that has spread internationally (ibid, 15-6). To this list we can also add the host of slow manifestos that have emerged online, such as the slow science manifesto,[8] the slow media manifesto,[9] the slow design movement,[10] and the slow fashion movement,[11] Honoré writes about proposals to build the world's first "slow hotel," a hotel that promises to remove the stresses and trappings of most commercial holidays (ibid, 35). Perhaps the most interesting expression of the rise in decelerationist culture is the production of "slow clocks," clocks that "tick once a year and measure time over ten millennia," the first of which is on display at the Science Museum, London (ibid, 37).

While the "slow movement" encompasses too many heterogeneous elements to be successfully encapsulated by a discussion of any particular one of them, one of the consistent tropes that can be observed is the appeal to pre-modern or anti-modern practices, or to practices that share an aesthetic with a certain cultural image of the pre- or anti-modern—walking, Tai Chi, traditional and local forms of cooking etc.— as a means of resisting and countering the acceleration of contemporary life. To provide just three examples of this phenomenon we could look towards the contemporary popularity of the musical genre "free-folk" (sometimes referred to as "freak-folk"), the rising interest in "paleo lifestyles," and the fantasmatic depiction of nature's resilience against the cruelty and indifference of technology in contemporary films such as *Avatar*. Music critic Simon Reynolds writes of the "free-folk" movement as being a trend that emerged in the early twenty-first century pioneered "by the likes of Charalambides and MV & EE, and popularized by Devendra Banhart and Joanna Newsom" and also including acts such as Wooden Wand and Espers

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[8] http://slow-science.org/
[9] http://en.slow-media.net/manifesto
[10] http://www.slowlab.net/slow_design.html
[11] https://www.notjustalabel.com/editorial/slow-fashion-movement

(*Retromania*, xxxiv; 343-4). Reynolds states that the genre can be characterized by blending together elements of traditional North American folk music, the work of what he refers to as "outsider minstrels," outsider folk composers such as Robbie Basho and Angus MacLise, and a fetish for "the acoustic and the analogue" in the form of the utilization of instrumentation belonging to bygone eras (ibid, xxxiv; 344). On Reynolds account, the "guiding fantasy" that sustains the genre is an invocation of the "unsettled wilderness of early America" and the possibility of an anti-modern "self-reliant existence, outside society and remote from urban centres" (ibid, 344). Indeed, for Reynolds the "free-" or "freak-folk" genre heavily mines a cultural identity that has been effectively "vanquished by the rise of a trans-American but rootless culture of consumerism and entertainment, oriented around brands, strip malls, Clear Channel, Ticket Master, multiplex movie theatre chains et al" (ibid, 344). Outside of the sonic influences of these artists, free-folk figures such as Banhart and Newsom embrace an anti-modern aesthetic in much of their album artwork, press photographs, and stage attire. For example, and as Sasha Frere-Jones states, the cover of Newsom's hugely successful and critically acclaimed album *Ys* features an oil painting by the Californian artist Benjamin Vierling in which Newsom is depicted in the "old-master style, with layers of egg-tempera and glazes. Strictly 16th-century processes, just like the recording of the album" ("String Theory," n.p.). Similarly, a quick online search for images of Devendra Banhart reveals photograph after photograph of the free folk musician adorned in tribal garb, face paint, and head pieces made of feathers and animal fur. This is not, however, to suggest that such contemporary longing for the anti-modern is particularly novel since the works of artists as eclectic as Kate Bush, the modernist painter and sculptor Paul Gauguin, and indeed the entire tradition of Romanticism since the late eighteenth century display this very tendency, albeit in heterogeneous forms. Nevertheless, such contemporary examples show, if nothing else, the persistence of a longing for and engagement with pre- and anti-modern aesthetics and practices within our contemporary culture. The desire to return to something "real" and "authentic" is purportedly at the heart of the return to analogue media in the work of various contemporary practitioners, insofar as the analogue supposedly allows for a return to what journalist Sean O'Hagan has referred to as the "values [of] the hand-made, the detailed and the patiently skilful over the instantly upgradeable and the disposable" ("Analogue Artists Defying The Digital Age," n.p.). Indeed, as Dominik Bartmanski and Ian Woodward, the authors

of *Vinyl: The Analogue Record in the Digital Age* have commented, the contemporary resurgence in the sale of vinyl records over recent years is spurred by the sense in which vinyl is an "alive" medium of "warm" and "organic" tones, one that requires a hands on approach to application—"lowering the tonearm, allowing the needle to reach the groove, observing the rotating vinyl disc," and so on (46-9). The discussion of the vinyl record as a living medium is contrasted to the "cold" sterility of digital formats such as MP3 files, which lack the "imperfections" and "vulnerabilities" of the more human and less machinelike medium of vinyl (ibid, 50). Indeed, since obsolescence is a pre-established component of many consumer goods, and given that such planned obsolescence functions to accelerate rates of consumption, the affirmation of more durable "traditional" formats often takes the form of a desire to return to a purportedly non-excessive form of life. Despite their prevalence and despite their immense rates of proliferation, current digital technologies are depicted as being inauthentic, banal, and pernicious, supposedly leading to world of disconnect and malaise that must be remedied by a renewed connection with authentic modes of cultural production.

An affirmation of slowness, authenticity, and the rejection of accelerated forms of cultural production and mediation are also offered to mass audiences in the form of successful contemporary films such as James Cameron's feature *Avatar,* in which a corporate militia invades an alien planet inhabited by a species of peaceful, tranquil, and deeply spiritual beings who appear to live in perfect harmony with their environment. The basic driver of the film's plot, set in the future year of 2154, is the depletion of natural resources on earth and the ensuing energy crisis that is caused by this irresponsible and excessive relationship between humans and their own ecosystems. Over the course of the film the human corporate militia uses its sophisticated technological war machines to battle against the equally impressive organic army of native beasts that the alien race of "Na'vi" are able to link with via a kind of telepathic empathy. While the stunning special effects utilized in *Avatar*'s production must be taken into account when considering the film's success, it is nevertheless interesting that such a clear condemnation of the excesses of modernization and of the military industrial complex, coupled with a celebration of indigenous pre-modern cultures that exist empathetically and harmoniously with their

environment, became one of the top grossing films of all time. Indeed, as Mark Fisher states, the conventional reading of the film is overwhelmingly that

> we may appear to be always-on-techno-addicts, hooked on cyber-space, but inside, in our *true selves*, we are primitives organically linked to the mother/planet, and victimized by the military-industrial complex. ("Terminator vs Avatar," 339)

Indeed, given that the lives of those in the Western world appear to be ever increasingly mediated by digital technologies, and that the injunction to be connected and active is bound to the prevalence of digital devices such as smart phones, computers, and tablets, it is perhaps not surprising that myths of our connection to the authentic and organic have struck a chord with viewers on a mass scale.

A far stranger example of this contemporary instantiation of the embrace of anti-modern aesthetics and practices, and particularly the image of a pre-modern being that lives in harmony with its environment and without excess, is the broad collection of trends connected to the popular image of Paleolithic humanity and its practices and modes of life. As the ecologist Marlene Zuk argues in her text *Paleofantasy: What Evolution Really Tells Us About Sex, Diet, and How We Live*, there is a growing trend to look towards ancient humanity to find a means of escaping the excesses of modernity and to locate "healthier" and more "natural" dietary, erotic, and sleep habits (3-6). She states that

> because we often think about evolution over the great sweep of time, in terms of miniscule changes over millions of years when we went from fin to scaly paw to opposable-thumbed hand, it is easy to assume that evolution always requires eons. That assumption in turn makes us feel that humans, who have gone from savanna to asphalt in a mere few thousand years, must be caught out by the pace of modern life, when we'd be much better suited to something more familiar in our history. We're fat and unfit, we have high blood pressure, and we suffer from ailments that we suspect our ancestors never worried about, like posttraumatic stress disorder and AIDS. (ibid, 3)

On Zuk's account, the still relatively contemporary revelation that we are not only genetically linked to the ancient Greeks and Romans, but also Neanderthals and African hominids that existed hundreds of thousands of years ago appears to underlie the strong contemporary feelings that we are "misplaced in urban society" (ibid, 5). In response to this feeling that "we humans, or at least our protohuman forebears, were at some point perfectly adapted to our environments" (ibid, 7), Zuk states that countless articles, television specials, books, and seminars have been produced

advocating "slow-food or no-cook diets, barefoot running, sleeping with our infants, and other measures large and small [that] claim that it would be more natural, and healthier, to live more like our ancestors" (ibid, 6). However, exactly what it would mean to live like our ancestors, or whether any of the purported benefits can be grounded empirically, is a matter of strong contention (ibid, 5).

Integral to all of these decelerationist positions and tendencies is the sense of a lost origin, which, if relocated, could guarantee a return to authentic and harmonious ways of living that avoid the excesses of modern life. In the wake of the enormous and immanent ecological threat of global warming, the concept of "sustainability" has become perhaps the most powerful and ubiquitous example of this desire for a return to more balanced and less excessive ways of life. Indeed, the concept of sustainability has gained an immense theoretical and cultural purchase over the last few decades as the discussion of the threat of global warming has become increasingly prevalent in our cultural imaginary. The contemporary appeal of ecological and cultural balance, harmony, and equilibrium, is perhaps best exemplified by this term "sustainability" insofar as it references the possibility of maintaining the modes of life that exist within contemporary capitalism, whilst exorcising the demons of extremity and excessiveness. Indeed, the contemporary theorist Tom Cohen states in his text "Murmurations—'Climate Change' and the Defacement of Theory," that there is a sense in which "sustainability" has emerged in contemporary discourse as a kind of rallying cry for the "subject of climate change," or the subject addressed by the call to sustainability, to be productive in the struggle to "'sustain' the level of comfort and acquisition that the economy of 'growth' demands" (19). In other words, there is a sense in which the discussion of sustainability, harmony, and balance functions to present a "common-sense" outlook on ecological crisis through which change is viewed as being only possible through maintaining the present system—albeit in a more "ethical" or humane form. Indeed, in his text "Time, History, and Sustainability" Robert Markley argues that the "projection of stability" onto nature, which underpins much of the discussion of sustainability, reveals a disquieting intersection between the latter and "exploitative ideologies of resource extraction" insofar as both rely greatly on immense calculations of various complex global phenomena (57-8). Just as neoliberal *doxa* holds that the larger and more efficient the networks of information that underpin the market become, the more stable the

economic system will be, the discussion of sustainability has emerged out of and is further propelled by the ever increased ability for individuals to calculate their impact on the environment—such as the trend of individuals calculating their "carbon footprints"—and to subsequently alter their lifestyles accordingly. Furthermore, and as the geographer and political theorist Erik Swyngedouw has pointed out in "Depoliticized Environments: The End of Nature, Climate Change, and the Post-Political Condition," the post Kyoto-Protocol trend of monetizing carbon dioxide or CO_2 in the name of sustainability, which has produced a rapidly growing financial derivatives market, sits oddly with the concomitant notion that sustainability is necessary as a result of the unchecked and unsustainable marketization and commoditization of all terrestrial entities and phenomena (265). Interestingly, this connection between the discussion of ecological sustainability and the neoliberal insistence that there is "no alternative" to the system of global capitalism can be found to resonate with the Honoré's claim that "slow activists are not out to destroy the capitalist system" but are instead simply looking to "give it a human face," as the term "virtuous globalization"—coined by key slow movement figure Carlo Petrini—suggests (*In Praise of Slow*, 15).

What is risky about this appeal to harmony, balance, and sustainability is the manner in which such terms function within a discourse that presents the late-capitalist status quo as being unavoidable, unchangeable, and simply part of a "common-sense" mode of social organization, to which no otherwise or alternative could reasonably be posited. Moreover, the concept of a balanced and harmonious natural world appears to have little connection to any environment that human beings have actually encountered. For Swyngedouw, drawing on the work of the Harvard biologists Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, the myth of a "stable" natural world must be replaced by an understanding of nature as "contingent, historically produced [and] infinitely variable" ("Depoliticized Environments," 260). Moreover, and as Robert Markley argues, the concept of sustainability ultimately refers to an

> idealized homeostasis between humankind and environment that never existed except in the sense that robust ecological systems could remain unaffected by low density populations of humans for climatologically brief periods of time, on the scale of centuries rather than millennia. ("Time, History, and Sustainability," 60)

Furthermore, not only does the discussion of a "sustainable" environment conjure idealized notions of a possible nature absolutely external to human social and cultural production—simply existing in complete balance with itself—it also functions to obscure the localized "natural" environment that different cultures encounter throughout the world. As Swyngedouw has argued, the idea that there is a "nature," fixed in self-identity, whose conservation affects all of "humanity" is quite common-place in the reactions to the impending doom of ecological catastrophe ("Depoliticized Environments," 268). What is problematic about such proclamations, Swyngedouw argues, is the extent to which they mask "ideological and other constitutive social differences" and function to "disavow democratic conflicts about different possible socio-ecological configurations" (ibid, 268). This is to say that, not only will the effects of global warming have distinctive impacts depending on one's geographical location, but that, moreover, the means of fighting global warming should not be simply viewed as having a stable identity—and one that involves sustaining the late-capitalist status quo. As Žižek has argued, for example, there could be a plurality of responses to ecological devastation:

> one can be a state-oriented ecologist (if one believes that only the intervention of a strong state can save us from catastrophe), a socialist ecologist (if one locates the merciless exploitation of nature in the capitalist system), a conservative ecologist (if one preaches that man must again become deeply rooted in his native soil), and so on. (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 95)

The point to be taken from Žižek's remarks is not that any of the strategies listed above—to which we could add feminist ecology which views the controlling of nature to be concomitant with patriarchy, as well as an anti-colonial ecology that looks to avoid disaster by confronting Western power and its hand in ecological crisis—is as good as any other, but, instead, that the dominant image of what an appropriate response, and what responsibility as such, looks like can, and should, always be challenged.

However, while the slow movement's nostalgia for "authentic" modes of cultural production thus serves as a problematic response to the excesses of consumer culture and late capitalism, the question remains as to what it would mean to resist the dominant modes of thinking excess and to attempt to say "perhaps" to excess. It is in the pursuit of this goal that we will turn to the seemingly inverse position of theoretical and cultural acceleration, as is provided by the contemporary theoretical

and aesthetic cluster known as accelerationism. In turning to a discussion of accelerationism we are not attempting to either provide an exhaustive account of a cultural strategy that is perhaps too heterogeneous to ever be reduced to a single coherent theory or set of maxims, though neither are we attempting to evaluate accelerationism in terms of its legitimacy as a political strategy for contending with the dominance of global capitalism. Instead, in turning to accelerationism we are attempting to reflect on a contemporary space that has been opened up by a diverse range of theorists for thinking about excess and our relation to it. As Steven Shaviro writes, accelerationism is perhaps best understood in terms of the argument that, with regards to late capitalism, "the only way out is the way through" (*No Speed Limit*, 2) or as Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian state in their introduction to *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*:

> the only radical political response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, or critique, not to await its demise at the hands of its own contradictions, but to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies. (4)

For Mackay and Avanessian, accelerationism involves the alignment of philosophical thought with the "excesses of capitalist culture (or anticulture)" (ibid, 4). Indeed, Shaviro elaborates on this position stating that accelerationism is broadly united in terms of a shared sense that in order for "globalized neoliberal capitalism" to be overcome "we need to drain it to the dregs, push it to its most extreme point, follow it into its furthest and strangest consequences. As Bertolt Brecht put it years ago, 'don't start from the good old things but from the bad new ones'" (*No Speed Limit*, 2). We could say that the accelerationist mode of resistance to the strictures of global capitalism involves rejecting any transcendental notion of what society "should" look like—from which a critique of contemporary capitalism could be attempted—and instead embracing an immanent position within capitalism from which capitalism can be transformed and modified. This resistant stance to capitalism, however, would not involve an attempt to shore up the subject, state, or economy by entering into an antagonism with its forces, but instead involves the attempt to conceptualize the manner by which capitalism's tendency towards abstraction and deterritorialization could be harnessed so as to overcome the processes of reterritorializing capital.

The term "accelerationism" finds its origin in Benjamin Noys's text *The Persistence of the Negative,* in which he discusses "accelerationism" with regard to a moment in 1970s French theory—notably the texts *Anti-Oedipus* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix

Guattari, *Libidinal Economy* by Jean-François Lyotard, and *Symbolic Exchange and Death* by Jean Baudrillard—and the influence that this moment holds on later theorists such as the British philosopher Nick Land, in which a certain emancipatory politics became tied to the possibility of ushering capitalism's excesses to the point of the breakdown of liberal democratic capitalist hegemony (4-5). As John Marks argues in his text *Gilles Deleuze: Vitalism and Multiplicity,* one of the underlying arguments of *Anti-Oedipus* was the rejection of an anti-capitalist strategy that looked to form "benevolent institutions" that could better harness individual desires, in favour of embracing capitalism's ability to break down or "deterritorialize" identity—whether understood as a collective or individual level (91). For Noys, the quote from *Anti-Oedipus* that speaks most clearly to this point appears in a section entitled "The Civilized Capitalist Machine" in which Deleuze and Guattari critique the Egyptian Marxist Economist Samir Amin's injunction for third world nations that had not yet been subsumed under modern capitalist systems to "withdraw from the world market" (*Anti-Oedipus*, 239). Against this injunction Deleuze and Guattari stated that the "revolutionary path" might be to "go in the opposite direction," to "go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization," since "perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough" (ibid, 239). Quoting Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari state that perhaps there is a need to "accelerate the process" and to push capitalism's excesses further so as to allow for the breakdown of capitalism itself (ibid, 240).

Therefore, while accelerationism must be, on Noy's account, understood as a term that refers to divergent and pluralistic discourses, there is nevertheless a sense in which these discourses are the heirs of Deleuze and Guattari's revolutionary possibility, affirming the need for an "engagement with forms and forces of technology and abstraction" that must be selectively accelerated or intensified in order to "punch through the limits of a stagnant and inertial capitalism" ("Accelerated Substance Abuse," n.p.). Using the language of *Anti-Oedipus*, capitalism's excessive deterritorializations must be accelerated to combat its regressive tendency to reterritorialize. Thus, capitalism is reproached from the accelerationist position not because of its excesses but because it simply isn't excessive enough. As Mark Fisher comments, capitalism—and especially the neoliberal capitalist affirmation of the free market—is purportedly an economic system that tends towards competition, freedom,

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and choice, and yet, increasingly the capitalist system instead produces monopoly and domination. He states that while "Bill Gates promises business at the speed of thought" capitalism increasingly offers us "thought at the speed of business. A simulation of speed and newness that cloaks inertia and stasis" ("Terminator vs Avatar," 345). Providing us with a more concrete example of the stasis of neoliberal capitalism, Fisher argues in *Capitalist Realism* that one of the contradictions of contemporary capitalism—particularly in the United Kingdom, where Fisher is situated—is that the explicit rejection of bureaucracy in favour of privatization appears to be followed by implicit "bureaucratic metastases" (41-2). Fisher states that in institutions such as universities and hospitals the push towards privatization has been encouraged in the hope of providing "friction free" exchanges in which "the desires of consumers would be met directly, without the need for intervention or mediation by regulatory agencies" (ibid, 42). However, such a push towards freeing up the market system, coupled with a desire to "assess the performance of workers and to measure forms of labour which, by their nature, are resistant to quantification, has inevitably required additional layers of management and bureaucracy" (ibid, 42). For Fisher, the function of the coupling of privatization with the need to endlessly measure and calculate labour "performance" is to deliver not innovation, but merely the appearance of innovation. Fisher highlights the emphasis in secondary schools on preparation for standardized tests over other aspects of pedagogy, and the prioritizing in British hospitals of routine procedures over complicated but life-saving operations, as worrying examples of the stasis and stagnation that results from the functioning of a contemporary capitalism that merely simulates innovation statistically (ibid, 44). Indeed, for Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, the writers of "#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," the neoliberal emphasis on competition fails miserably to deliver innovation and, instead, simply leads to "patent wars and idea monopolization" coupled with a "retrograde approach to technology" in which innovation emerges in the deficient form of "marginally better consumer gadgetry" (355).

The artist Nate Harrison provides a concrete example of such capitalist stagnation in his art installation and genealogy of the "Amen break" entitled *Can I*

Get an Amen.[12] In this installation, Harrison presented an audio-documentary on acetate vinyl which explores the emergence of many classic hip-hop beats—such as N.W.A.'s "Straight outta Compton" and Mantronix's track "King of the Beats"—and almost entire genres of dance music such as Drum and Bass, Jungle, and Hardcore Techno, out of the heterogeneous appropriations of a six second drum break sampled from "Amen Brother" by the 1960s funk and soul band The Winstons. Over the course of his sonic excavation of the history of the amen-break and its propulsion, by way of the sampler, into one of the most used samples in the history of electronic music, Harrison notes that what began as an illegal deterritorialization—though he doesn't use this term—of intellectual property was slowly reterritorialized by private companies such as Zero G Limited, who Harrison notes are one of many private companies that have subsequently copyrighted the "Amen break" as their own intellectual property. Once protected in this way, anyone who attempts to make money from a licensed copy of the Zero G Limited "Amen break" potentially faces strong punitive action as supported by contemporary forms of copyright law. As Harrison notes, if such laws had been preemptively established in the 1980s and had stopped the first illegal use of the "Amen break" in a variety of contexts, several genres, thousands of clubs, jobs, and records, and millions of dollars would never have entered into circulation.

Following the accelerationist argument, then, what is problematic about contemporary capitalism is not that it is too excessive or fluid, but instead, that, by way of a persistent process of re-privatization and an imposition of scarcity, capitalism inhibits its own productive forces. Indeed, the "recovery" witnessed in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 gives yet another example of the static dimension of capitalism that accelerationism, in its theoretical form, seeks to overcome. As the contemporary Italian philosopher and media theorist Franco "Bifo" Berardi has argued in his text *After the Future*, we have found in the aftermath of the economic crisis that while wages fell, unemployment rose, and mass poverty became an ever more apparent reality, only the financial component of the capitalist system has since been able to "recover" in the form of rising stock market indices and the

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[12] *Can I Get An Amen?*, 2004. Recording on acetate, turntable, PA system, paper documents. Dimensions variable. Total run time 17 minutes, 46 seconds.

renewed payments of enormous bonuses to banking executives (139). For Nick Land, a major figure in the Anglophone importation of radical French approaches to the question of capitalism, the present system of global commerce cannot be referred to as capitalism at all, since, for Land, capitalism must be understood as a form of risk-taking enterprise that is absolutely fluid and deterritorialized, and over which there is no "*superior tribunal*" ("Odds and Ends," 366). Land presents capitalism as a violent non-human force of artificial intelligence that accelerates humanity towards the radical otherness of technological singularity and/or death (ibid, 362; *Fanged Noumena*, 441). If there is any sense in which the forces of life and thought have not been made entirely immanent to the machinic forces of flow and dissolution then, on Land's account, we simply have not reached the capitalist system itself ("Odds and Ends," 366-9). As Shaviro writes, Land's "incendiary essays" celebrate the possibility of conceiving of capitalist "deterritorialisation as liberation—even (or above all) to the point of total disintegration and death" (*No Speed Limit*, 14)—a possibility that is certainly far removed from our present situation of mass unemployment and state funded bank bailouts.

Accelerationist discourse appears then to offer a radical challenge to the decelerationist logic of impeding capitalism's alienating functions. Indeed, the accelerationist position opens up a space outside of the "common sense" stance on capitalist excess, insofar as the former raises the possibility that "excess" can be construed differently than as it is presented by way of the decelerationist logic. Rather than simply opposing some sense of beneficial stability or order to a malignant excess, the accelerationist line of argument suggests the existence of heterogeneous orders of excess within capitalism—and sees some as being more resistant than others. However, just as the proponents of the "slow movement"—and other adherents of the strategy of deceleration—take an analysis of the lived conditions of late capitalism to be paradigmatic for understanding our situation and offering potential forms of resistance, the accelerationist strategy has its own strong parallels to the everyday experience of life under neoliberal or late capitalism. As a result, at this juncture we will turn away from the more theoretical strains of accelerationism in order to attend to forms of cultural production such as electronic dance music, or "techno," that appear to involve a similar response to capitalist excess. While the decelerationist argument insists that, in our moments of better judgment we realize

that what we need and lack is a slower and more tranquil mode of life against the alienation and oppression of capitalist excess, the discussion of cultural forms of accelerationism such as techno may show that capitalism opens up spaces in which those excesses can be re-intensified so as to allow for their affirmation, such that techno might be understood to provide a cultural manifestation of the accelerationist embrace of capitalist excess.

It is difficult to picture capitalism without the figure of the industrial, or perhaps "post-industrial" city. Cities can be dense and dehumanizing places of anonymity. Cities are places of noise, crowds, and heat. In cities one finds oneself trapped in crowds on streets and in trains, trapped in traffic jams caused by impatience, wreckage, and often both. In his novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo writes of cities as thermo-incubators, as citadels of heat:

> Heat. This is what cities mean to me […] The heat of air, traffic and people. The heat of food and sex. The heat of tall buildings. The heat that floats out of the subways and tunnels […] Heat rises from the sidewalk and falls from the poisoned sky. The buses breathe heat. Heat emanates from crowds of shoppers and office workers. The entire infrastructure is based on heat. (10)

While cities produce excessive amounts of heat, the uncomfortable proximity of the crowd, and the frenetic pace of life under commoditized time, these urban spaces also produce sites of intensification where what was draining or exhausting becomes, once recontextualized, exhilarating. It should be no surprise that techno emerged out of industrial centres: Detroit, Chicago, Manchester, and Berlin, since there is perhaps an homologous relationship between the distinct and yet related evolutions of cities and the music that vibrates through them. In a city one can feel absolutely alone and yet be constantly surrounded by people. This is a commonplace and alienating experience of loneliness and disconnect that anyone who has lived in a city can appreciate. However, at a rave the same anonymity and isolation of being amidst a crowd of strangers can be transformed into an ecstatic loss of self. The constant and yet unproductive movement that one experiences whilst being jostled inside of a crammed train compartment or sat fidgeting in a cue or traffic jam has the potential to be intensified and transformed during a rave into the euphoric and yet equally unproductive movement of dance. As Michel Gaillot writes in his text *Techno: An Artistic and Political Laboratory of the Present*, raves bear witness to a Dionysian

"resistance or recurrence of festiveness and 'expenditure,' as if man had always felt a need to discover and share zones of excess" (23).

Augé writes of cities as being the locus of the "non-place," of spaces devoid of embodied time or affect, sterile sites lacking the particular characteristics that may enable the experience of community. He states that the modern world of the non-place is a world

> where people are born in the clinic and die in the hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity); where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines, and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral. (*Non-Places*, 78)

And yet all of these affects of the non-place—feelings of alienation, loneliness, powerlessness, etc.—once intensified through the techno-scientific products of recreational drugs and drum machines, results in the elevation of the non-place—the empty warehouse, the non-descript shell of the factory—into sites of rapture. As Gaillot states, in techno we find the "intensification of the energy invested in daily life" (*Techno*, 26). Techno is perhaps the accelerationist art *par excellence*, insofar as it embodies the possibility of turning the cybernetic, repetitive, and post-industrial spaces of modernity—often viewed as sites of alienation, anxiety, and suffering of various kinds—into spaces for what Gaillot calls the "time of existence" (*Techno*, 25). Gaillot writes that techno uses technics "not for the future, but for the moment, the time of existence, literally *ek-sistentia*, 'standing outside or besides oneself,' ecstasy" (25). The excesses of modernity, the hot crowds; the noise and drone of car engines, of pneumatic drills and siphoning pumps, air-conditioning units and constant shouting, laughing, and crying—all of these excesses that wear down the subject of urban life—can be re-contextualized and re-intensified so as to produce a kind of ecstatic rupture of identity in which one ironically feels fully alive. Gaillot's "times of existence" seem to have a strong parallel to those moments of being outside of one's sense of self that Georges Bataille designated with the term "inner experience" and characterized as "living states of ecstasy" (*Inner Experience*, 215). As Land clarifies, inner experience is not to be misunderstood as something that happens "internally" or within the confines of a subject (*The Thirst for Annihilation*, 108). The "core of inner

experience," Land writes, "is not personal identity, but naked intensity, denuded even of oneself […] a broken lurch into the unknown" (ibid, 108-9). Therefore, the repetitive nature of techno and its resistance to communicating meaningful ideas or culturally specific notions about identity becomes the artform's strength, rather than its weakness, insofar as it produces the possibility of transforming the alienating and dislocating excesses of modernity and of life in cities into the excess of inner experience. The abstraction and silent communication that Augé attributes to the cybernetic flows of the urban non-place can, on this account, be transformed through techno into the ecstatic silent communication between bodies denuded of identity, moved by an artform that is often as abstract as it is intense; comprised of synthetic and repetitive loops that are "dumb" both in the sense that they resist the "sophistication" of complex meaning that one associates with other art forms such as painting, cinema, or literature, and insofar as techno is in a sense mute, having no explicit message to convey. Techno, then, entrenches itself in urban life, not because it can produce a meaningful engagement with the often alienating urban environment, but, instead, because it can temporarily eliminate the very subject of alienation. As the contemporary artist Mark Leckey states, exemplifying the appeal of techno perfectly:

> I like my music autistic; repetitive, mechanical, with a set pattern. Then I like that pattern to break down and a new one to emerge. My body likes it. I like the sense of music controlling you, and you give yourself up to it. That's what I learned raving; that if you succumb, things start to happen on another level. (*Mark Leckey: On Pleasure Bent*, 177)

Techno's capacity to act as a form of resistance to the excesses of late capitalism are therefore to be found not in its capacity to signify ideas or to offer a diminishment of intensity and excess, but rather in its capacity to accelerate and intensify those excesses. For example, Reynolds argues that the techno genre "jungle," an off-shoot of drum and bass that emerged out of "economic instability, institutionalized racism, and increased surveillance and harassment of youth by police," can be read as offering the "eroticization of anxiety" as a mode of "cultural resistance" (444-7). Reynolds points to jungle tracks such as T. Power's "Police State" and Photek's "The Hidden Camera" as "lyric free critiques of a country that conducts the most intense surveillance of its own citizenry in the world" (445). However, critique should not be understood here in terms of the evaluation of ideas, but, instead, with regards to jungle's capacity to open up a space in which the anxiety produced by constant surveillance, threats of unemployment, terrorism, and state violence, can be re-

contextualized and intensified so as to produce an inner experience that shatters the identity of the subject.

If techno offers a means of re-intensifying the excesses of life under late capitalism—"too much" noise, heat, strain, and repetition; "too little" meaning, communication, and rest—then it is the inverse response to the decelerationist privileging of the slow. The slow movement, along with other decelerationist responses to modern life, seems to function as a means of escaping from the excesses of global capitalism by opening up spaces of de-intensification, sustainability, slowness, gentleness, and harmoniousness. However, is this really the case? Do techno and slow culture travel in opposite directions, or are they instead heterogeneous elements of the same set of practices? We conventionally understand slow cooking, slow sex, slow food, and the return of folk art forms and practices as involving the diminishment of the excesses and intensities that are everywhere in a capitalist society—or, at least, this is how proponents of the decelerationist trend understand and discuss their own actions. But is this perhaps not a misleading representation of what it is like to "slow down?" Is not the appeal of lingering over a meal, of taking one's time during sex, of cycling through the countryside precisely that these experiences produce great swells of intensity and excess whether it be erogenous, olfactory, or otherwise? Perhaps it is precisely this conventional image of a society torn between those who long for a return to a harmonious, diminished, and mild engagement with our surroundings and those who long to accelerate the ecstatic features of capitalist excess that must be challenged in order for us to approach a radical rethinking of the question of excess, and therefore to be in a better position to affirm excess via a disposition of "perhaps." Accordingly: what if both the cultural strategies of deceleration and acceleration identified previously were discussed not as being mutually exclusive, but, instead, as being heterogeneous expressions of a desire to embrace excess and to further intensify life under late capitalism? That is to say, if we suspend entirely the language of extensity that permeates the metaphors of acceleration and deceleration, and instead engage with a thinking of non-linear intensity—the transition between different qualities that cannot be stratified or placed within a hierarchy of magnitude—the cultural strategies associated with either response may be understood as varying means of intensifying the conditions of life under late capitalism so as to transform unbearable excess into a possible form of life

through which a radical modification of late-capitalist subjectivity could be affirmed. In doing so we will be able to rescue some elements of the slow movement from the problematic discussion of sustainability, origins, authenticity, and harmony that is embedded in the decelerationist tendencies of the slow movement. At the same time, we might begin to understand excess in terms other than those of the conventional depiction of excess as the underlying problem of modernity.

For example, French philosopher Frédéric Gros's text *A Philosophy of Walking* has many of the hallmarks of the decelerationist tendencies that can be found in other texts associated with the slow movement. In this text Gros discusses walking as being antithetical to our speed-obsessed society of consumption. He states that, "if you want to go faster, then don't walk, do something else: drive, slide or fly. Don't walk. And when you are walking, there is only one sort of performance that counts: the brilliance of the sky, the splendor of the landscape" (2). Such sentiments give Gros's text the appearance of yet another resurgence of the romantic pastoral, an ode to the wonders of nature and the tranquility that can be found once one escapes the modern city and its excesses. Indeed, there is much in Gros's discussion to affirm such a reading. Gros argues that the irony of our modern preoccupation with speed is that accelerating our lives—demanding that we have access to everything all of the time and at greater and greater speeds—does not save time but merely makes time move by unnoticed, without being experienced or reflected upon (ibid, 37). He states that such an approach to life carries over to our approaches to walking: "a bad walker may sometimes go fast, accelerate, then slow down. His movements are jerky, his legs form clumsy angles. His speed will be made of sudden accelerations, followed by heavy breathing" (ibid, 36). Such an approach to walking, while it may lead to one arriving at a destination more quickly, only improves one's life in terms of what can be abstractly calculated—taking one hour to arrive instead of two, getting twice as much done by midday etc.—but leaves no time to "breathe, to deepen," with the result that one's experiences in life merely flit by (ibid, 37). As opposed to this, the lesson to be learned from walking is that "the authentic sign of assurance is a good slowness" and that "days of slow walking are very long: they make you live longer" (ibid, 37). Such sentiments appear to be perfectly aligned with those expressed by the figures of the slow movement: if we live slower, and keep in touch with nature, then we can

escape the excess of capitalism and return to something more natural, more balanced, more sustainable.

However, Gros curiously states, in the very same chapter of his book, that what a good walker learns to adopt is a pace of slowness that "isn't exactly the opposite of speed" (ibid, 36). It's a tantalizing formulation—a slowness that is differentiated from speed but not *exactly* opposed to it—but Gros does not deal with the possibility explicitly. Nevertheless this seemingly paralogical formulation may offer us the opportunity to rethink the image of slowness that underpins the conventional reading of a text like *A Philosophy of Walking*. For Gros's text persistently ties walking to notions of transgression, excess, and rupture. Walking, on Gros's account, is not simply a means of escape from the city or of returning to some pre-modern mode of life—although this is undoubtedly bound to Gros's development of the theme of walking. For Gros, walking does not simplify life or provide a safe escape from the stresses and tensions of modernity's purportedly lightning fast pace, but, instead, provides us with a means of intensifying the experience of urban life by way of opening ourselves up to discomfort, choice, transgression, and excess (4). Gros states that walking is irreducible to "freeing yourself from artifice to taste simple joys," since walking can open the walker to great excess: "surfeits of fatigue that make the mind wander, abundances of beauty that turn the soul over, excesses of drunkenness on the peaks, the high passes (where the body explodes)" (ibid, 6). Walking and slowness are presented here as means neither of escaping excess nor of returning to a harmonious and tranquil relationship between humans and their environment. Instead, walking is discussed as a means of taking the subject to its limits, of opening it up to excesses that rupture identity: "by walking, you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and a history" (ibid, 6). Conventionally understood, walking could not be more opposed to the excessive frenzy and noise of a rave in an abandoned warehouse, factory, or other disused urban space. And yet, following Gros's account, we find walking discussed as simply a different means of escaping the imposition of subjectivity by becoming attuned to intensities that exist in the overwhelming beauty of the sky or the fatigue of the body.

In the same text, in a chapter dedicated to Nietzsche's love of walking, Gros turns to the question of the relationship between walking and thought. While the

contemporary discussion of this relation can suggest an appeal to the need for a thinking that resembles the carefulness and deliberateness of a slow walker—a gentle and methodical thinking that is unlike the hasty speed of contemporary thought that simply leaps between new ideas—Gros instead takes walking here as a model for a limber and acrobatic thinking that avoids the stifling sluggishness of conventional institutional thought (ibid, 18). Gros invokes Nietzsche's question to the works of contemporary scholars and artists—"can they walk? Even more, can they dance?"— and presents it as a challenge to those writers who "have written their books solely from their reading of other books" (ibid, 18). For Gros, the scholar, entombed in the stuffy, dusty library, writing books that are "overloaded, saturated, with dead, vain erudition" pertains to a wretched physiology that is crushed by the weight of "quotations, references, footnotes, explicatory prudence, indefinite refutations" (ibid, 18-9). According to Gros these texts are like "fattened geese […] weighty, obese, *boring*, and are read slowly" (ibid, 19-20). Such a scholarly figure is opposed to Nietzsche's Zarathustra who states, in a section of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* entitled "Of Reading and Writing," that "in the mountains the shortest route is from peak to peak" (67). The "author who composes while walking," writes Gros, is free from the bonds of scholarship and this is reflected in a thought that "retains and expresses the energy, the springiness of the body" (*Philosophy of Walking*, 20). Here the relation between thinking and walking wrests upon an affirmation of speed, liveliness, and intensification *against* the sluggish slowness of scholarly work.

Such an affirmation of an intensified thought that is quick, nimble, and invigorated draws an odd parallel to the great affirmer of capitalist excess and acceleration, Nick Land. Land's work is heavily influenced by writers of aphorisms, fragments, and unfinished systems—such as Nietzsche, Bataille, Rimbaud, and Trakl —writers with the "long legs" required to leap from mountain peak to mountain peak, as Zarathustra would say (*Thus Space Zarathustra*, 67). In his text on the poetry of Georg Trakl, "Spirit and Teeth," Land attacks Jacques Derrida, and specifically *Of Spirit*, Derrida's text on Heidegger, for its lack of urgency, for its lack of "abruptness, desperation, or any of the raw intensities of haste" (*Fanged Noumena*, 179). Land appears suspicious of the carefulness of Derrida's prose, though not necessarily his ideas, because it has the mark of a writer who feels "he will survive for some considerable time" and is therefore willing to engage in a writing of "elucidations, re-

elucidations, elucidations of previous elucidations, [all] conducted with meticulous courtesy" (ibid, 179-80). Land instead takes his cue from Trakl, whose poetic works he describes as "vectors of haste" (ibid, 181). "Trakl," writes Land, "took very little time over anything. Surviving as he did to the age of twenty-seven he had very little time to take" (ibid, 181). Perhaps Land's most vehement attack on the figure of patient, slow scholarship is to be found in his text *The Thirst For Annihilation*, where his lamentations mirror Gros's own critique of scholarship. Land proclaims that

> scholarship is the subordination of culture to the metrics of work. It tends inexorably to predictable forms of quantitative inflation; those that stem directly from an investment in relatively abstracted productivity. Scholars have an inordinate respect for long books, and have a terrible *rancune* against those that attempt to cheat on them. They cannot bear to imagine that shortcuts are possible, that specialism is not an inevitability, that learning need not be stoically *endured*. They cannot bear writers *allegro*, and when they read such texts—and even pretend to revere them—the result is (this is not a description without generosity) 'unappetizing.' Scholars do not write to be read, but to be measured. They want it to be known that they have worked hard. Thus far has the ethic of industry come. (35-6)

For Land, scholarship's disregard for a frenzied and accelerated thought is conditioned by its own adherence to quantitative measurements of work. The length of a study—that one publishes a book and not an article—and the volume of citations it receives go some way in determining its value within the contemporary academy, dominated by cybernetic metrics of scholarly work—bibliometrics and scientometrics—that allow for precise calculations of the value of academic labour. Here, then, Land reveals more than simply a congruency between his own position and Gros's, since, in critiquing the "investment in relatively abstracted productivity" that drives the cybernetic production and calculation of information—in which the scholar is embedded—Land not only helps us to conceive of both the affirmation of walking as a metaphor for thought and the affirmation of an *allegro* thinking as two examples of the heterogeneous desire for intensity, but, furthermore, reveals that the common enemy of both these positions as being a form of cybernetic *access*.

Indeed, the original antonym of excess, as the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has noted, is not to be found in notions of moderation, restraint, or lack, but in terms of access (*On Balance*, 2). As Phillips states, access "is the freedom to go in" whereas excess "is the freedom to go out" (ibid, 2). Increasingly within Western society the notions of access and accessibility are wedded to the further scope given to cybernetic

systems of information management. As Jean François Lyotard argued regarding the conditions for the production of knowledge in developed economies, the desire to make a posited "whole" determinable and the constitutive elements of the whole commensurable with each other was, on his account, the central criterion for the emergence of the "postmodern condition" (*The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv). In Lyotard's argument, the "application of this criterion to all of our games"—which is to say, to all singular modes of social organization—results in the violent global injunction: "be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear" (ibid, xxiv). Put differently, the drive for determinability and commensurability can be understood as a drive for greater access—the system of determination must be granted the freedom to "go in," the freedom to penetrate everywhere and everything—and for greater accessibility, i.e., everything must be commensurable with every other part of the system.

Indeed, Dean uses the term "communicative capitalism" to highlight the ways in which the push for greater access is wedded to a neoliberal ideological framework that ultimately undermines democratic politics despite presenting itself as *the* affirmation of such politics. She states, in her text *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* that the ideals of "access, inclusion, discussion, and participation" have come to stand as the conventional justifications for the "expansion, intensification, and interconnections of global telecommunications" (23). While the "rhetorics of access, participation, and democracy" are used in order to present an ideological means to "secure the technological infrastructure of neoliberalism," Dean argues that the furthering of cybernetic access and accessibility does not produce anything resembling a democratic politics, but, instead, functions to weaken the possibility of such political projects (ibid, 23-4). For Dean, instead of empowering the *demos*, the profusion of cybernetic access merely relocates the process of democratic governance to the setting of "finance and consumption driven" media culture (ibid, 24). Indeed, Lyotard's statement that it will one day be "conceivable that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information" (*The Postmodern Condition,* 5) appears increasingly prophetic, as is evinced by both the media spectacle of contemporary Western election cycles, and the exile and imprisonment of major whistle blowers such as Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, and Edward Snowden. For Dean, communicative

capitalism and the ideology of access is underpinned by the notion that the subjects of late capitalism or neoliberalism are entirely free, autonomous, and rational, and can therefore simply express their desires through "democratic" cybernetic channels. She states that, fundamental to the contemporary neoliberal ideology that the market is "the site of democratic aspirations" and the "mechanism by which the will of the *demos* manifests itself" is a circular logic:

> consider the circularity of claims regarding popularity. McDonald's, Wal-Mart, and reality television are depicted as popular because they seem to offer the people what they want. How do we know they offer what people want? People choose them—*they must be popular*. (*Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 22)

Against the view that, once "democratic" cybernetic networks of access were made increasingly accessible the deep, natural, and intrinsic desires of the *demos* would spontaneously spring forth, for Dean it is instead far more likely that desires must rather be actively produced and constructed through complex social processes. This is perhaps the reason why the Internet, which is conventionally regarded as the apex of democratic networks, along with online communities that support user generated content such as YouTube and Tumblr, appears to be saturated with homogeneous repetitions of "popular" content—such as "lolcat" videos and images—as opposed to heterogeneous expressions of the "unique" desires of individual users.

While Dean does indeed raise a host of significant objections to the profusion of technological access within our present culture, does this argument itself not run dangerously close to resembling the prior split between excess and balance? If we are able to salvage some positive notion of excess by replacing the dichotomy of "excess and balance" with the dichotomy of "excess and access," do we not risk having to privilege an excessive lust for intensification as a more "balanced," "sustainable," or "harmonious" form of life than one governed through access—which is here presented as enabled by an imbalanced, inharmonious profusion of cybernetic information? Just such a position seems to be offered to us by Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* when he states that "a new left could begin by building on the desires which neoliberalism signally failed to do: a massive reduction of bureaucracy" (79). For Fisher the concomitant rise of neoliberal economic dogma, and the increased levels of bureaucratic control, excessive-auditing, and other forms of largely digital managerialism, need to be replaced by forms of worker autonomy (ibid, 79).

However, such an appeal to the left's capacity to return a sense of balance to an economic system overburdened by an imbalance of cybernetic management seems intrinsically bound to a moralizing of access as another form of excess—that is to say, as a view of bureaucracy and digital forms of information exchange as having some kind of internal balance, either side of which one finds the immoral excess of "too much" or "too little." While both the slow movement and accelerationism seem to affirm different notions of excess, and, if such forms of excess are conceived merely as means for "balancing out" a system prone to cybernetic access, then have we not once again failed to affirm, in a spirit of "perhaps," the possibility of an openness to excess that avoids construing it in moralistic and pejorative terms?

What is perhaps vital about excess is that it can only occur through the breaking of a previously established norm, limit, or law. To be in excess is to exceed some given or convention and to enter into a hitherto unknown terrain. This does not mean that all forms of excess are *a priori* beneficial or just, but this nevertheless does not detract from the fact that, unless we intend to mire ourselves in perpetual stagnation, we simply cannot know which new response or act will have been the one so needed until we open ourselves to excess. As Phillips has argued, one of the reasons why people react so strongly to excess is because it allows us to maintain the fantasy that there is some absolute and eternal standard for what is proportionate, balanced, sustainable, and just. He writes that,

> every time we have the moralistic version of the excess experience—the righteous indignation, or rage, or grief about the transgressions of other people—we relocate ourselves, firmly and safely, within the rules, the protective walls, of our societies. In these moments we are reminded of how the world should be, and that someone who knows the rules and can enforce them is looking after us. (*On Balance*, 4-5)

To look at excess in a way that is "beyond good and evil," to engage with it without moralizing—which is to say, without prejudice, without appealing to conventional images of the nature of excess—presents the opportunity for an individual or collective to challenge and reformulate norms and conventions that dominate our existential and conceptual possibilities. Indeed, in suspending such notions of the "prior appearance" of excess, can we not also challenge the Badiouian conception of the "event" (see introduction and chapter one) as that which opposes the "mundane" and "quotidian" nature of the everyday? If we cast aside the assumption that the "event" must appear in the guise of a radical anathema of everything quotidian and

conventional, and thereby maintain the importance of learning to say "perhaps" to such everyday phenomena—conventionally construed in pejorative terms—is there not the possibility that we can open ourselves up to potential sites of excess that may occur within *and* as something that would otherwise appear as a part of the "banal" and pejorative world of "everyday life" under late capitalism?

Accordingly, while we cannot absolutely and unproblematically embrace all forms of excess, we can neither find grounds to absolutely discredit or undermine excess either. Indeed, without moments of excess, events of rupture where we go out from a present law, nothing could possibly change. For example, while it is easy to moralize an event like the global financial crisis as being nothing more than bankers and financiers, if not also borrowers themselves, exceeding the limits of what could be considered an acceptable desire for money, perhaps the far more difficult response is to engage with the problem of a global financial system, along with the economic dogma that underpinned it, that had become so entrenched that even flagrant crisis could not spur even minor changes. As Philip Mirowski argues in the aforementioned *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go To Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*, in the wake of the global economic collapse there seems to have been merely a sense of "vague dissatisfaction" in the "status quo of economics" from the majority of leading experts in economic theory (5). What makes such an inability to develop or consider new ideas and approaches to economic reform and restraint in the wake of the crisis ever more disquieting for Mirowski is the degree to which economists have become increasingly convinced that they hold the means of understanding every possible phenomenon, such that economics has become an increasingly powerful and ubiquitous discourse (ibid, 23-4). In that sense, the "excessiveness"—in the form of "greed," for example—that is routinely understood to have established the conditions for the financial crisis can be understood as less a transgression of reasonable limits than a form of pure *conformity* with the prevailing mode of reason. It might be understood as an "excessiveness," in other words, that cannot tolerate any excess to its own form or system of excess. And if that's the case, then it should come as no surprise that, as Mirowski notes, even those who were deeply critical of the response of world leaders, leading economists, financiers, and members of influential think tanks to the financial crisis have struggled to move beyond economic orthodoxy and previously sanctioned ideas (ibid, 20). Therefore, in

the face of a global economic system that is increasingly integrated, driven by a logic of cybernetic access and underpinned by a static ideological belief regarding its functioning, perhaps the risk of excess, and of exceeding the safety of previous established norms is an undecidability that cannot be overcome by appealing to a prior unity, harmony, or balance between humanity and the various systems it manifests through.

If we suspend the conventional image of speed and slowness, and of a single gradient that offers the possibility of a harmonious balance between these two extremes, we can begin to rethink excess as something vital for the possibility of resistance with our contemporary situation. As Žižek has argued, we need to reject the false choice that states we must pick between two extremes and instead attempt to radically rethink this very choice itself (*Demanding The Impossible*, 7). Žižek argues that, "you can always say that we need balance. But the real revolution, for me, is when you change the balance itself: *the measure of balance*" (ibid, 7). In his text *Absolute Recoil* Žižek develops an affirmative account of radical ruptures and breaks within established orders, moments of excess where the order of an existing law is violated, by turning to a reading of one of the final lines from Richard Wagner's Opera *Parsifal*: "the wound can be healed only be the spear that smote it" (quoted in: *Absolute Recoil*, 136). The wound reveals the excess of the body—blood, tissue, muscle—and is itself an excess—something else additional to the body that must be dealt with so as to prevent infection, or the worsening of a condition. A wounded body is a body opened up to the outside, a body that has traversed its own limit (the limit of the flesh). According to Žižek's reading of this Wagnerian formulation from *Parsifal*, the wound, this excess, cannot be healed by simply returning to some pre-excessive origin—as if the wounded body could miraculously return to the state when it was "healthy" and unwounded—or by appealing to some kind of soothing balm or non-violent instrument of care (ibid, 136). Instead, the very rupture of the wound itself must be turned to in order for the wound to be healed; as Žižek formulates it, "the very disintegration of traditional forms opens up the space of liberation" (ibid, 136). In other words, when faced with the problem of excess—of exceeding an established law or norm—the only means of liberating oneself of negative phenomena is to rethink excess itself as a possible site of radical liberation. Žižek elucidates this claim by turning to the problem of colonialism. In a country like India, colonized by

the British, there is a palpable sense in which the domination of a colonial power appears as an excessive and oppressive force that alienates the Indian people from their "true identity" (ibid, 132). In having to perceive themselves through the British culture and the British language the people of India are not able to obtain their true "Indianness," and are therefore alienated. However, for Žižek the "lost origin," this "essential Indian identity" is not something that *actually* previously existed before occupation and could therefore be returned to (ibid, 132-3). Instead, Žižek argues that what the people of India are alienated from is not the "pre-colonial India" but rather a new India altogether (ibid, 132). For Žižek, the wound or sense that things have become excessive or out of balance is the very precondition for asking what balance means, what balance could or should look like and how one might go about producing it. This is not to say that Žižek believes that the British should be thanked for oppressing the Indian people—far from it, he thinks that all forms of oppression should be vehemently fought. Rather, for Žižek, whatever existed before the colonization was not an idyllic origin that should be nostalgically revered. Žižek's message is that, more often than not, we live under oppression, violence, and negative phenomena that we have simply learned to accept as part of the standard order of our lives. Therefore, when a radical rupture occurs—some kind of crisis or rupture, whether this happens at a personal or collective level—and things are revealed in their excessiveness, in their "too-muchness," we might instead grasp this excess as an opportunity to rethink and challenge the very laws and impositions that had previously decided for us what is and isn't adequate, balanced, and harmonious.

In times of excess, therefore, there can be no guarantee found in a nostalgic (re)turn to a previous norm nor in trying to impose a new norm as a means of escaping excess. One need not be forced into the false choice of repetitive partisan politics, decelerating towards "the good old days" or attempting to accelerate towards a future utopia. Even though we come to receive an image of our existential and conceptual possibilities as already existing on one side of the division between excess and balance, we can take seriously the notion that within the everyday, in the everyday conventions of dancing to techno or of taking a quiet walk, for example, there persists a tending toward divergent states of intensity that suggest, even if unwittingly and unconsciously, a testing of the very structures of balance, and of what balance means. Indeed, against the sense that there *should* be either a radical

acceleration of the ubiquity of life under capitalism, or a radical deceleration of said life, we can say "perhaps" to a common and quotidian tendency to change, that questions the very dichotomies of excess and balance, and of the everyday and the accelerated.

Chapter Five:

Lazy Techniques

*"I was looking for a job, and then I found a job
and heaven knows I'm miserable now"* — Morrissey

As argued in the first half of this thesis, Badiou and Žižek raise the question of how postmodern philosophy is to think "true" resistance, when it is more inclined to concern itself with the particular over the universal and the marginal over the grand, and thereby struggles to engender a desire for a radical and decisive break with the "everyday" of late capitalism, from which particular and marginal phenomena emerge. Accordingly, in order to challenge this desire for a return of "great" and "heroic" phenomena—whether this be understood politically, aesthetically, or otherwise—that will purportedly serve as "true" forms of resistance to late-capitalist hegemony, we have explored the potential for affirming, in the spirit of "perhaps," more quotidian even "ignoble" phenomena as being potentially resistant. The last chapter critically explored the seemingly opposed "decelerationist" and "accelerationist" stances to late capitalism in order to uncover the potential for affirming a certain kind of excess that appeared to be inseparable from each of these responses to late-capitalist hegemony. Despite the immense difference in the aesthetics and rhetoric used by thinkers of either the "decelerationist" or "accelerationist" response, on the one hand, and the difference in the modes of *praxis* affirmed on the other hand, each response seeks to affirm a novelty and change that could be produced through breaks or ruptures in phenomenal existence, regardless of their size or status. Indeed, in engaging with both of these responses we saw an affirmation of the ruptures and breaks that can occur amidst the great speed of capitalism such as the affective changes that are made possible by modes of comportment as humble as walking, and the ecstatic intensity that can be found through the affective *accelerations* of techno—both being phenomena that don't always appear to resonate with the tone of heroism that often characterizes Badiou's narrative of the transformative "event," nor with the tone of decisiveness that

characterizes Žižek's affirmation of the "act" as part of his critique of contemporary capitalism.

Accordingly, since the previous chapter built a case for affirming a pluralistic approach, or one of saying "perhaps," to a plurality of divergent forms of contemporary life—and in turn affirming them as possible sites of resistance, as opposed to producing hierarchies of human activity as ranked according to a value such as "balance" or "slowness," and demarcated into "resistant" or "complicit"—this chapter will extend the prior chapter's affirmation of unvalued forms of the quotidian in order to raise the question of whether we might find in other such phenomena further signs that a critical or resistant potential can emerge in sites and in fashions that a certain kind of philosophical authority (see chapter two) is unable to endorse. For instance, if a dominant image of resistance stresses the exigency of political *action*, then perhaps bound up with that call is a tacit disregard for, if not deprecation of, the figure of laziness. By exploring the phenomenon of laziness as a potential form of resistance, not only to the hegemonic structures of contemporary capitalism, but also to what might be referred to as the "entrepreneurial subject," we can perhaps uncover a vocabulary of human praxis that is potentially resistant to the ideals of moral surety, greatness, and heroism. Furthermore, in engaging with a vocabulary of "laziness" we might find an opportunity to resist the arguably elitist vocabulary and sensibility that is engendered by Badiou's and Žižek's contemporary critiques of postmodern philosophy.

Laziness is conventionally depicted as one of the many sins of life under late capitalism. Indeed, it is conventional to hear of Western workers being demonized for being lazy and unwilling to work hard, for wanting instead to drink, take drugs, and socialize. For example, Gina Rinehart—Australia's richest woman and the sixth richest woman in the world—has been quoted by Emily Bourke as advising that

> if you're jealous of those with more money, don't just sit there and complain; do something to make more money yourself—spend less time drinking, or smoking and socialising, and more time working. ("More Work Less Play," n.p.)

Such advice, that the poor are only so due to their lack of volition and discipline, speaks to a ideological understanding of the figure of the worker that appears to have intensified over the course of modernity, and that has drawn criticism from figures as disparate as Paul Lafargue and Bertrand Russell. For Lafargue, the writer of the

infamous essay *The Right To Be Lazy* and the son-in-law of Karl Marx, the "furious passion for work" and the "love for work" are harmful delusions foisted onto the working classes, and maintained by priests, economists, and moralists alike—each of whom, Lafargue argued, cast their own "sacred halo over work" (*The Right To Be Lazy*, 23). For Bertrand Russell, the notion of work as a virtuous activity has greatly stymied our capacity to reevaluate the roles and responsibilities of workers in economically dynamic times (*In Praise of Idleness*, 5-7). For Russell, our regard for work has conventionally viewed it as a kind of duty that is tied to moral notions of decency and not to notions of productivity, as is overtly espoused (ibid, 6). Such a view would seem to clarify Rinehart's remarks, since, who works harder than a single mother doing a double shift in a fast-food kitchen, or a sex worker having to endure the persistent threat of emotional and physical abuse? And yet, one is hard pressed to think of two candidates less rewarded and less praised for the hard work that is supposedly expected of them. Instead, for Russell, one's expectations to work, while seemingly caught up in a framework of mutual obligation and practical necessity, is in fact linked to deeply moralistic sentiments that begin from having posited the necessity of work rather than having discovered it as a conclusion—as is so often portended (ibid, 6-7).

The popularity of lamenting the supposedly lazy and slothful status of humanity seems to have lost none of its appeal in the contemporary world, since, with the rise of increasingly sophisticated digital technologies, the new trope of a species dangerously close to perpetual inertia seems to have much purchase. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of the ubiquity of the popular image of laziness as one of the central problems of life under late capitalism is to be found in the hugely popular animated film *WALL•E*, directed by Andrew Stanton and produced by Disney's Pixar studios. Set in the future year of 2805, the film depicts the planet Earth as having been reduced to a massive trash-heap of discarded commodities and production byproducts, and therefore uninhabitable by humans. Humanity has accordingly left earth behind and now lives on a kind of artificial planet-cum-luxury space cruiser named the "Axiom." The eponymous protagonist, WALL-E, is a robot designed to stay behind on earth and prepare it for humanity's eventual return from exile in space. Once WALL-E has found sufficient evidence that Earth can once again support vegetative life, he is confronted with the transformation that has occurred to humanity during

their long stay in space. Aboard the Axiom, humans have grown obese, lazy, and indifferent to their surroundings, relying almost entirely on support from a host of machines to complete basic tasks like eating and moving. The humans aboard the Axiom are depicted as perpetually contained within mobile chairs from which they gorge on food and distract themselves with visual entertainment, and part of WALL-E's struggle to get them to return to earth involves waking them from their laziness and indifference. While *WALL•E* could be read as a condemnation of technology and an exposition of its purportedly corrupting powers—since, aboard the ship, humanity finds itself effectively trapped within a prison of digitally mediated leisure and relaxation—such a reading would have to ignore the protagonist WALL-E's status as the technological savior of humanity. Accordingly, *WALL•E* can be read, not as a condemnation of technology as such, but instead as a meditation and affirmation of the supposed necessity of work. As the conservative cultural commentator Rod Dreher has commented, affirming such a reading,

> Wall-E contends that what makes us fully human is cultivating our own deepest nature by working, and working together. In a stunningly iconic image at the film's end, the Tree of Life on the new earth grows out of an old work boot. Humanity renews the face of the Earth through its own labor, by people taking responsibility for themselves instead of being passive consumers coddled by the corporate welfare state. ("Wall-E, Pixar's Surprisingly Political Postmodern Masterpiece," n.p.)

While *WALL•E* can certainly accommodate less conservative readings—especially with regards to Dreher's line regarding the welfare state—it is nevertheless interesting to note the extent to which the film appears to celebrate the figure of work. While the frictionless digital technology of the "Axiom" is presented as a dangerous and seductive force, WALL-E embodies a more industrial aesthetic that lends his appearance to notions of work and labour. Unlike the all-white perfection of the automated services of the "Axiom," WALL-E's visible treads and whirring cogs creates the impression of a technology more transparently laborious, a technology of grit, sweat, and grease rather than of frivolousness and frictionlessness. The danger that *WALL•E* presents us is therefore framed in terms of the threat of laziness, not to our material survival, since the inhabitants of the "axiom" seem to get along fine without labouring, but instead to our very "essence" as human beings.

For Giorgio Agamben, the ascendance of the concept of work, and of a vital "will" that propels such work to the status of a "common denominator of every

human activity," emerges out of historical processes that denote several major ruptures in Western thought. He states in *The Man Without Content*, that the ascent of the concept of work begins

> at the moment [John] Locke discovers in work the origins of property, continues when Adam Smith elevates it to the source of all wealth, and reaches its peak with Marx, who makes of it the expression of man's very humanity. (70)

The concept of work as a "common denominator of every human activity" that Agamben speaks of is traced out by Franco Moretti in *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, a text that attempts to trace the emergence of bourgeois culture through the modern European novel. Moretti turns to the figure of Robinson Crusoe as providing a means of constructing the character of "the bourgeois before his *prise de pouvoir* [taking of power or simply "takeover"]" (13). One of the reasons that Moretti sees Crusoe as a paradigmatic character is the seemingly bizarre work ethic that the latter exhibits over the course of Defoe's novel (ibid, 29-30). Moretti acknowledges that initially Crusoe must work in order to survive and prosper despite his initial misfortunes; however, Moretti points out that, even when his "future needs" are well and truly secure Crusoe "just keeps toiling, steadily, page after page" (ibid, 29). Moretti remarks that when Crusoe is at the height of his zeal for work, listing to the reader the immense size of his estate on the Brazilian island that houses his plantation, he utters that such products of work will surely attest to his never having been idle—to which the reader, Moretti contends, can only agree and yet ask "why *does* he work so much?" (ibid, 29-30). Indeed, Moretti states that while Crusoe is no doubt endlessly active during his adventures, there is no direct link between his activity and the immense fortune he amasses by the end of the novel, since Crusoe "is rich because of the exploitation of nameless slaves in his Brazilian plantation" (ibid, 30). Therefore, freed from the need to work to sustain himself, and gaining no material benefit from his "solitary labour," which "hasn't brought him a single pound," Moretti argues that such endless activity is pursued because "work has become *the new legitimation of social power*" (ibid, 30). Therefore, on Moretti's account, the endless toil that Crusoe subjects himself to is there "*to justify his fortune*," to prompt the reader to consider that Crusoe cannot be anything but deserving of such riches because "we have seen him work like no other character in fiction" (ibid, 30).

Aside from the possibility of Crusoe's immense enthusiasm for work revealing something of the character of bourgeois culture, what is illuminating about Moretti's reading of *Robinson Crusoe* is the extent to which he locates in the title character an attempt to literally work his way past insufficiency and inoperability. For it is by way of the depiction of this work "ethic" that the material production made possible by the immense cruelty of slavery is able to be misrecognised as being merely a byproduct of Crusoe's sovereignty as an actor. In other words, Moretti locates in Crusoe both a fear of "not being enough," of being idle and therefore undeserving, and an inability to acknowledge his wealth as more a product of the toil of others than an expression of his absolute self-sufficiency and tenacity. Crusoe is, of course, insufficient in the struggle to attain wealth and fortune, relying on the slaves at his plantation in order to amass the fortune he discloses towards the end of the novel. And yet, Moretti argues, in othering himself, in becoming both a slave to his own desire to master and a master over his own toil and labour, Crusoe appears, as Moretti states, to be capable of legitimizing his social power through becoming a figure of endless activity (ibid, 30)[13]. In becoming such a figure, Crusoe's life is absurdly subordinated to the necessity of work, and, furthermore, the violence of exploitation becomes justifiable through a particular interpretation of action as fundamentally isolated, belonging only to sovereign individuals.

Moretti makes the point that there is something deeply paradoxical at the heart of such an attempt to find sovereignty through work. He states that, since the sovereign bourgeois figure works for themselves, "because [they] no longer [have] a master," they must work for themselves as "other," since, "work only arises as a result of an external constraint" (ibid, 30). Accordingly, Crusoe "becomes a carpenter, or potter, or baker, and spends weeks trying to accomplish something" only for the figure of "Crusoe the master" to appear, pointing out the "inadequacy of the results" and from which "the cycle [of work] repeats itself all over again" (ibid, 30). This is because, on Moretti's account, work has become an ideological function that is used to legitimate the inequalities in society rather than being a necessary activity for all.

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[13] In Moretti's reading of *Robinson Crusoe* one finds an uncanny resemblance between Crusoe and the contemporary figure of the corporate executive, someone who moves between projects constantly; has to endure endless working lunches, meetings, flights and conferences, and yet who arguably does little of the work that produces the wealth of the various companies they consult for. In being endlessly mobile, and compiling an increasingly impressive *curriculum vitae*, such figures cannot but look important and vital despite being peripheral to the labour that actually produces wealth.

Such a figure as Crusoe—convinced of his sovereignty as a sole actor, endlessly active despite no clear necessity, apathetic to the violence that his pursuit of wealth inflicts on others, etc.—resonates strongly with our own time and bears resemblance to the concept of the "entrepreneurial subject." Indeed, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval make just such a link in their text *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (117). Like Crusoe, the entrepreneurial subject places themselves under regimes of what Dardot and Laval have called, drawing heavily on Foucault, "constant self-inquisition," and "systemic self-control" (*The New Way of the World*, 265). Just as Crusoe's labour appears to be underpinned, in Moretti's reading, by the desire to show he was never idle, the contemporary entrepreneurial subject, Dardot and Laval argue, is provided with the injunction to see work as ensuring "autonomy and liberty, in that it is the most beneficial way of exercising one's faculties, expending one's creative energy, and proving one's value. This work ethic is not an ethics of self-renunciation; it does not make a virtue of obeying orders from a superior" (ibid, 265). Like Crusoe, who begins his tale by ignoring his father's advice to stay within the "middle state" in life, which his father views as the "best state in the world," and instead goes and makes something of himself through adventure and enterprise (*Robinson Crusoe*, 6), the entrepreneurial subject must seek liberation from "the passive status of yesterday's wage-earner" through his or her capacity to become a "personal enterprise" (*The New Way of the World*, 265). According to such a logic, to fail to apply oneself fully to the task of obtaining self-sufficiency and self-mastery through endless work, to fail to engage in labour that could testify, to paraphrase Crusoe, that one is not idle, is to fail to take up life's great adventure. In this sense, then, we are all provided the contemporary injunction to become our own Crusoe.

If the concept of work truly has reached a state of ascendance as the primary mode through which we make sense of our being as humans—as beings who can produce and own property, and through that production and ownership come to determine ourselves as selves—then it is not surprising that "laziness" has stood as the anathema to everything prosperous and good in "civilized society." However, and as was previously alluded to, laziness is not normally seen as simply a form of inaction or as the negative antithesis of will, but is construed instead largely in moral terms, representing the kind of activity or the manner of our doing that resists notions of productivity, "best practice," or the economy of work. Indeed, it is a great irony

that despite its common association with inactivity and absence our encounters with laziness often reveal it as something oppressive and excessive. Laziness never seems to involve the suspension of "activity" or "doing," insofar as lying on a couch absent-mindedly still involves certain practices and processes and even perhaps goals—as in the goal of not getting up or of not "doing anything." What is revealed in locating laziness as always already involving activity, is the necessarily contextual nature of laziness as such—i.e., that one can only ever "be" lazy by first having resisted or refused some prior conception of the useful and productive role that one is to play. Accordingly, "laziness" can be understood not simply as the possibility of refusing strain and strenuousness, but rather as the possibility of opening up a space between what is an acceptable, useful, and productive activity, and what seems to resist or raise questions about such accepted notions that surround our active comportment. Laziness can thus feature as a form of resistance not simply because avoiding work transgresses our cultural morality of work, but, furthermore, because all manner of "lazy techniques"—that is to say, techniques that appear to resist dominant and conventional logics of utility and productivity—are graspable as forms of resistance to the prevailing demarcations of what is and is not existentially and conceptually possible. Such lazy techniques do not grasp the "essence" of laziness—and therefore cannot be absolutely opposed to work—but instead refer to those modes of comportment that sit at the edge of what a particular logic of utility or productivity can support as acceptable or appropriate. Therefore, in order to pursue such "lazy techniques," a term borrowed from the Italian philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato, we shall explore various figures within our culture that actively engage in the rejection of conventional notions of "good" action—i.e., of "work."

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault provided us with, amongst other things, a genealogy of the historical circumscription of the body within the logics of utility and productivity. He argued that at least since the seventeenth century the body had become both the "target" and "object" of relations of power that culminate in what Foucault referred to as the "disciplinary," and that functioned to produce a utilitarian understanding of the body and its forces (136-7). On Foucault's account, out of these respective historical periods we find the emergence of heterogeneous "techno-political" methods and regulations associated with institutions such as the school, hospital, and the army, and that functioned to

"control" and "correct" the "operations of the body" (ibid, 136). Foucault outlines a series of diverse practices within these institutions that relate to the imposition of temporal and spatial orderings of the body—organizing the use of the body in terms of specific time-tables and routines; breaking down the instruction of specific tasks such as marching or handwriting into smaller tasks so as to micromanage the movements of the body towards the maximizing of efficiency; and connecting or correlating the body to the gesture, i.e., connecting every gesture to a "gymnastics," a "rigorous code" that "invests the body in its entirety" (ibid, 141-52). All of these practices were, for Foucault, ambiguous insofar as they both empowered and disempowered the body by forming it to be better suited both for actions, and to the regimes of power on behalf of which the body is to act. For example, the student who better embodies the school's instructions regarding handwriting will have a greater means of articulation, and the soldier, by being better brought within a corporeal regime of instruction that targets the entire body, is less likely to be exhausted—indeed, both exhibit an increase in certain capacities deemed useful by the institution in question. However, such an intensification of the body's capacities, as is illustrated by the figure of student or soldier, is problematized and rendered ambiguous by Foucault when he writes that, "discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these forces (in political terms of obedience)" (ibid, 138).

Deleuze's late text "Postscript on the Societies of Control" extends and mutates the Foucauldian analysis of the emergence of disciplinary regimes of power, and their function in forming the body, by relocating this analysis from the sites of disciplinary power—or "enclosures" such as the school, hospital, or prison—to transitory and yet ubiquitous networks of control. Published in French in 1990, Deleuze argues there is a "generalized crisis" apropos of the "environments of enclosure" that Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish* (3). Whereas the subject of the disciplinary society moves from one enclosure to another, from the schoolhouse to the factory, from the factory to the hospital or the prison, receiving a reformation of their body and subjectivity as they enter and reenter respective enclosures, Deleuze argues that within the societies of control the subject encounters something more like

"free-floating"[14] processes of control that follow the subject everywhere and yet cannot be posited as belonging to anyone one enclosure or space within society (ibid 4). Deleuze provides a useful means of clarifying the distinction between the disciplinary society and the societies of control when he invokes the image of the "mold" as pertaining to the disciplinary enclosure of the factory space or the schoolhouse, and the notion of "modulation," of reformulating discrete units that can recombine to form divergent and yet equally complex systems, as pertaining to the societies of control (ibid, 4). Deleuze's contribution to the analysis of the formatting of bodies under regimes of power is significant for our discussion because it allows us to further understand the manner in which bodies and their forces become subordinated to logics of utility and productivity. Whereas in the disciplinary enclosure the body is formed and reformed under a particular and localized *telos*—for example, improving the posture of the student to improve their capacity to sit passively and attentively—Deleuze argues that the body is subjected to forms of "*perpetual training*" that prevent the complete formation of the subject and yet inhibit the release of the subject from forms of control (ibid, 5). Such analysis is vital for understanding the ways in which the subordination of the body and its forces to utilitarian ends in contemporary society is not imposed simply by way of sovereign power, nor an architecture of discipline such as the enclosures analyzed by Foucault. Whereas the body undergoes a certain process of forming within the disciplinary enclosure of the school, and another within the enclosure of the factory, Deleuze's discussion of perpetual training finds expression in the endless professional development seminars, health and safety courses, retraining workshops, work retreats, physical evaluations, and psychological evaluations that cause the subjectivities of student, worker, prisoner, and patient to be always present and yet not determining. Furthermore, the subject of the society of control actively participates in this perpetual training, insofar as one constantly monitors their general health in accordance with the latest journalistic information on major illnesses such as heart disease or cancer, purchases books on personal development, and attends seminars relating to the ergonomic use of the body. In this sense one can be a student, worker, and patient without ever having to step into one of the enclosures traditionally associated with these forms of subjectivity. This process of perpetual training allows the subject to

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[14] Deleuze attributes the formulation of control as being "free floating" in contemporary life to his contemporary Paul Virilio ("Postcript on the Societies of Control, 4).

live longer, work harder, and know more, albeit in ways that are seemingly intractable from the broader logics of utility and productivity. That is to say, one becomes more empowered the more one is willing to embrace certain normative conceptions of life, and to view one's education, health, and personality as various forms of interlinked work.

For Maurizio Lazzarato the inability to question the significance of work and its centrality to our lives is a serious theoretical misstep in our contemporary situation. While the production of a morality of work, through which the salvation of the individual is tied to their capacity to work, produce, and earn, has often been attributed to industrialists, capitalists, and the bourgeoisie, Lazzarato comments that the high hopes placed on the possibility of salvation via work appear almost unavoidable. He writes in *Marcel Duchamp and the Refusal of Work* that even the communist tradition, which is vehemently opposed to capitalism and its exploitation of workers, cannot escape the privileging of the concept of work and of the worker (6). Indeed, for Lazzarato, one of the unresolved confusions of communism resides in its inability to answer whether or not the communist objective is "the emancipation from work or emancipation through it?" (ibid, 6). The almost universal admiration for and devotion to work is evinced, on Lazzarato's account, by the immense aversion to inactivity that can be detected in political movements of all kinds. Lazzarato states that inactivity appears particularly as a kind of anathema to the "worker's movement" insofar as inactivity, in the form of industrial action or strikes through which work and its framework are suspended, is engaged in an instrumentalized form only as a last resort in the attempt to procure more or better standards of work (ibid, 7). The "refusal of work," argues Lazzarato has always been in the service of work or in the service of that which is a vehicle for the arrival of work, or better work, whether in the guise of the "party or State" (ibid, 7). The possibilities that are to be located within inactivity, or laziness, are therefore entirely underdeveloped for Lazzarato. He writes that it is particularly during the reign of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on endless growth and persistent activity, that "the 'refusal of work,' non-movement, or inaction—has either been ignored or inadequately problematized" (ibid, 7).

Lazzarato's short text functions to problematize the conventional ignorance and condemnation of laziness by exploring the figure of Marcel Duchamp and what Lazzarato refers to as his "lazy techniques" (ibid, 19). Lazzarato states that

Duchamp's laziness "discloses new dimensions of existence and new forms of life" that open up a space to problematize notions of action and identity (ibid, 9). Duchamp's lazy techniques, such as those for "making" art in the form of readymades, present the opportunity for rethinking the subordination of action, time, and subjectivity to the logics of utility and productivity explored above. The very name "readymade" itself presents a paradoxical riddle that brings into question the conventional notion of action. For something to be "ready" it must assume the form of suitability to a task or situation, and this seems to contradict the process of being "made" in which something is formed or produced for a situation or task. With regards to a readymade, the suitability of the object in question is already present in the object as it is, the artist need do no more than simply select the object. Despite this, the object must also be "made" into an artwork through this process of selection and does not become an artwork until the selection has occurred. Therefore, paradoxically, the object both is and is not ready, both is and is not made. Such a paradoxical status raises questions regarding the supposedly sovereign nature of actions and of the association between property and identity. Moreover, the notion of choice is brought into question here insofar as the readymade, unlike most forms of art, does not privilege the decisions or choices of the artist, but instead helps to reveal the connection between choice, on the one hand, and what makes itself available to be chosen on the other. Indeed, Dardot and Laval discuss "choice" and the "obligation to choose" as being terms fundamental to the "new norms of conduct of subjects" within contemporary society (*The New Way of the World*, 174-5). They state that from the perspective of the neoliberal economy "it seems one cannot conceive a subject who is not active, calculating, and on the look-out for better opportunities" (ibid, 175). Moreover, Dardot and Laval argue that producing subjects who are "active, enterprising, 'agents of their choices,' [and] 'risk-takers'" has become one of the central missions of most developed Western states, even when such a subjectivity would appear ill-suited to the prevailing milieu (ibid, 175). For example, in the case of the unemployed, contemporary policy in a large number of developed Western countries tends towards interpellating those without work as "job-seekers," who must act as "agents of their own employability" and must be open to retraining, relocating, and refocusing themselves in order to secure work, regardless of whether there are suitable jobs, or any jobs, on offer (ibid, 174). Indeed, Lazzarato has written elsewhere on this very form of contemporary subjectivity, stating that

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to become human capital or an entrepreneur of the self means assuming the costs as well as the risks of a flexible and financialized economy, costs and risks which are not only—far from it—those of innovation, but also and especially those of precariousness, poverty, unemployment, a failing health system, housing shortages, etc. To make an enterprise of oneself […] that means taking responsibility for poverty, unemployment, precariousness, welfare benefits, low wages, reduced pensions etc., as if these were the individual's "resources" and "investments" to manage as capital, as "his" capital. (*The Making of the Indebted Man*, 51)

One of the primary injunctions leveled at this contemporary subjectivity is the need to be constantly active and making choices, regardless of the circumstances that such subjects experience. As Lazzarato states, there is a demand within the contemporary neoliberal economy that one "*take upon oneself*" the "costs and risks" that are externalized by the state and by corporations (ibid, 51). This demand thereby functions to produce subjects who must see every crisis and disruption that impacts them as being a result of poor choices and as a possibility for new choices and more productive choices to be made in the future. If a massive financial crash that decimates an industry causes an individual to be unemployed then the problem lies with the individual's "choice" of training and employment, and, according to this logic, the onus is therefore on the individual to "choose" new forms of training and new forms of employment.

It is against this notion of choice that we can position our thinking of the readymade. Duchamp states that he did not "choose" his objects by way of reasoned decisions—weighing the pros and cons of certain aesthetic decisions as opposed to others—but instead "chose" to use objects such as the *Bicycle Wheel* as a readymade simply because it was "a pleasure to have it in my room" (*Marcel Duchamp: The Afternoon Interviews*, 53). This does not mean, however, that Duchamp was incidental to or superfluous for the readymade, but, instead, that his "lazy techniques" problematize the image of the isolated genius or the internal expertise of the artist. Indeed, the readymade is produced by Duchamp's encounter with something that signaled him as much as he "chose" it. Therefore, not only do Duchamp's "lazy techniques" remind us of the broader context that any choice or action depends upon—i.e., a surplus that cannot be reduced to Duchamp's intentions or decisions—but also the very thinking of the artist as beholden to specialist techniques is brought into question. As Lazzarato states, "the readymade is a lazy technique because it involves no virtuosity, no special know-how, no productive activity, and no manual

labour" (*Marcel Duchamp and the Refusal of Work*, 19). Moreover, *Fountain*, arguably Duchamp's most well known work despite being initially deemed unsuitable for exhibition, shows us more than the refusal of work construed in terms of "productive activity" or "manual labour," since *Fountain* resists the very notion of the "work" of art itself. As Calvin Tomkins reminds us, when Duchamp's urinal—or, should we say, "R. Mutt's" urinal?—was entered into the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, an exhibition that claimed to accept and exhibit any artwork that was entered, the judges refused to accept it as a submission, and the fate of the physical object is to this day unknown (*Duchamp: A Biography*, 178-9). The "work," then, has come to be known by way of Alfred Stieglitz's famous photograph from 1917, Sidney Janis's replications of the Fountain that were exhibited in the early 1950s, and a host of articles and discussions dedicated to the "work" (ibid, 180; 422). Therefore, and as Robert Briggs and Niall Lucy have argued, rather than existing in one form, *Fountain* is perhaps better discussed as an example of divergent media, spanning multiple media, times, and locations ("Frame #1," n.p.). In this sense then, the readymade once again brings our attention to the relational and distributed contexts that make possible what appear to be singular and originary actions and choices. Furthermore, such a dispersed form undermines both the work of the artist and the work of the artwork insofar as *Fountain* both inhibits the sale of art and the status or sovereignty of the artist.

Routinely, exhibitions are held in cities all over the world where major works of the past and of the contemporary scene are shown for public display. The institutions that hold these shows function to interpellate the "viewer" by offering them the subjective position of one who values the hard work of cultural appreciation. One could object that visiting galleries can be a boring experience, that it costs money to enter museums, and that the entire affair seems not unlike the actions of the "culturally religious," who attend a Sunday mass not out of conviction but out of habit or out of respect to a set of practices they no longer believe in. Such a view could be easily dismissed as being a cynical cover for the laziness of an individual who was simply unwilling to do the work required in the labour of cultural appreciation. However, according to the contemporary philosophers Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, it is the galleries themselves who are truly resistant to the work of culture. They argue in their text *Art as Therapy* that despite the "opening of new galleries, the

channeling of significant government resources towards the production and display of art, [and] the desire on the part of the guardians of art to increase access to works" there is a striking lack of clarity regarding what work art is supposed to do (vi). Botton and Armstrong argue that the fault of this lack of clarity lies with "the artistic establishment" and its "reluctance to address the question of what art is for" (ibid, vi). In order to help rectify this unwillingness to address the question of art's usefulness, the pair curated a major exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia, presenting works from the gallery's collection alongside didactic panels that were specifically written for each work and that provided the viewer with a clear understanding of how that work could be considered useful. According to Botton and Armstrong the aim of these projects is to remind viewers that "art is a tool, and we should focus more clearly on the good that it can do us" (ibid, vi). It seems to follow from Botton and Armstrong's argument that, if galleries are willing to do the hard work of explaining to viewers what the work of art is meant to do, then it will be easier for viewers of art to perform the labour of cultural appreciation. Furthermore, once both the gallery and the viewer are working more efficiently, the artworks themselves can begin to perform their own labour of helping us to "compensate" for "in born weaknesses," or, more specifically, "psychological frailties" (ibid, vi). Turning to *La Sieste* by the French post-Impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard, a painting that depicts a naked woman sleeping on top of her bed sheets, facing away from the viewer, Botton and Armstrong provide an example of art's purported therapeutic benefits under the heading "Sickness: work, work, work." They write:

> It's summer; they had lunch in a shady spot in the garden; they had a salad and ate some fruit. Afterwards they came indoors to lie down for a while and escape the heat. Then they had sex. She is completely relaxed. In a little while she'll have a shower and maybe get started on that report. She'll be in a good frame of mind to tackle it. (7)

It appears that the message Botton and Armstrong hope we take from Bonnard's painting is that there is a need to balance our work lives with intermittent relaxation and leisure—and, in fact, such relaxation will be the precondition for higher rates of productivity ("she'll be in a better mind to tackle it"). As Jonathan Crary points out in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, since the nineteenth century it has become common sense that "if workers were allowed modest amounts of rest time" they would ultimately prove to be "more effective and sustainable producers in the long run," a piece of wisdom that is not lost on Botton and Armstrong (14).

The question raised by Botton and Armstrong's attempt to ground art in a specific function—i.e., as a form of therapy—is whether or not this limits the potential for art to function as a form of resistance to the production of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Indeed, while Botton and Armstrong open up an important space for thinking through the question of our contemporary relationship to the gallery institution, they do so while setting out clear goals for art, the gallery, the critic, and the viewer, in terms that seem to offer little possibility for art to function as a space of resistance to the logics of productivity and utility that underpin it. While, as we saw in the previous chapter, art forms such as techno can serve as a possible means for converting feelings of alienation into moments of ecstatic rupture, there is something disquieting about Botton and Armstrong's affirmation of art's capacity to boost productivity, and their insistence that art must perform some kind of concrete work. This is not to deny that there is something interesting and seemingly significant about the questions they raise regarding the functioning of contemporary art intuitions in late-capitalist societies. However, given the confluence that currently exists between art and contemporary capital—especially finance capital—it seems problematic to assert that what contemporary art lacks is a means of engendering better workers, and that such a boosting of productivity should be regarded *as art's work.*

For Lazzarato, the readymade presents the possibility of opening up a space that counters such a logic of productivity and utility insofar as it is "an operation of declassifying, of eluding subjugations" such as "the identification with a profession" (*Marcel Duchamp and the Refusal of Work*, 27). The quasi-choice that Duchamp performs, his "lazy technique" as Lazzarato would say, raises the possibility that a clearer identification with "professions" is the last thing that is needed. Instead, in embracing a refusal to perform the labour of culture—refusing to perform the established role of the viewer, artists, gallerist, critic etc.—one is opened up to the possibility of new forms of subjectivity and divergent encounters with others—both in the sense of other people and other things. Indeed, the laziness of the Duchampian readymade, the fact that quite obviously "anyone could do it"—a phrase that is bandied around commonly and pejoratively wherever avant-garde art or avant-garde inspired art is displayed—should not be interpreted as meaning that anyone can and should assume the preexisting subjectivity of the artist, but, instead, that distinctions between "art" and "non-art," or between "creative production" and "passive

spectatorship" are enforced through ideological mechanisms and "common-sense" assumptions regarding the nature of activity and work. Or, as Lazzarato states, Duchamp's refusal of the work of art, his refusal of the work of the artist, and his refusal of the identity of the artist itself as someone possessing a special kind of human capital,

> is capable of opening the possibility not of greater public access to art or the public's "democratic" acculturation, but of constituting and enhancing one's ability to act on the real. (ibid, 39)

This reference to an ability to "act on the real" might appear to stand counter to the preceding affirmation of the refusal of work and the possibilities of laziness. It is worth paying particular attention, however, to Lazzarato's use of the preposition "on," as opposed to speaking of acting "in" the real. Where acting "in" the real would appear to involve acting in accordance with established notions of utility, usefulness, and propriety, to "act on the real" is to withdraw from these assumed "givens" and to open the space for new encounters and subjectivities. As Lazzarato states himself,

> lazy action is at the antipodes of capitalism, in which the ends (money) are everything and the process nothing. The process literally wouldn't exist if it didn't make money. Laziness, on the other hand, is completely concentrated in process, on the becoming of subjectivity and its ability to act. (ibid, 40)

Given that Duchamp's indolent gestures suggested the possibility of making art redundant—at least in the sense of art as emblematic of a creative potential reserved for a small group of specialized workers—it is unfortunate that Duchamp's "lazy techniques" have become canonized and used to reinvigorate the very notions of art, activity, and work that his readymades problematized. Duchamp is often characterized as an avant-garde genius and as a having been capable of producing highly original works and sovereign actions that help to reproduce and affirm humanist and bourgeois notions of subjectivity that view individuals as isolated free agents whose actions are self grounding. As the art theorist Rosalind Krauss has argued, for many readers of the avant-garde tradition, but also for many avant-garde artists themselves—such as Malevich, Marinetti, Brancusi and others—the notion of the "self" functions as an irreducible and absolute origin or source for the work of art. Despite the rupture with tradition that is heralded by the emergence of the modernist avant-garde, therefore, the notion of the artist as a sovereign actor—an idea that has become increasingly dominant since the Renaissance—is defended by the emphasis placed on the notion of "originality" (*The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other*

Modernist Myths, 157). Consequently, rather than closer attention being paid to the possibility of putting art out of work, so to speak, the labour of the work of art is reaffirmed in the guise of the work of expressing an originality that is owed to the creative self. The artist is then retrained as a producer of new and original experiences that have not yet been seen, thereby reaffirming the notion that the creative act belongs to a specific domain and to a special and sovereign actor. For those interested in production of new works of art and of the refashioning of art's labour, this shift has proven to be no source for concern—and, nor should it be, since the post-Duchampian trajectories of minimalism, conceptual art, and what is referred to as "contemporary art" all pay testament to the success of this shift in opening up new avenues for artistic work. However, for our purposes of exploring the possibilities offered by the lazy techniques Lazzarato locates in the readymade, we must venture to the limit of the concept of art and the limit of the institutions that house art in order to explore the contemporary manifestations of this rejection of work and its associated subjectivities.

Many of the radical elements of Duchamp's lazy techniques, for instance, have been recuperated by the very system that they held the potential to disrupt. The anonymity of Duchamp's *Fountain* has long been displaced by the fame that the readymade has generated; the scandalous quality that prevented *Fountain* from being exhibited is now normalized as the very cultural function of contemporary art; the rejection of notions of work and the value of skill has been significantly subordinated to the discourse of originality and individual authenticity. All of these elements, however, are alive and well—and perhaps in a more radical form—in the illegal activity and "lazy technique" of "tagging." As Alison Young defines it in her text *Street Art, Public City: Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination*, tagging is "the writing of an artist's name, often in a particular calligraphic style, often repeated many times on different surfaces" (19). While there has been a veritable boom in the popularity and commerciality of art steeped in the traditions of twentieth century graffiti—mostly concomitant with the rise of the hugely successful British street artist Banksy—tagging is still largely perceived as a puerile criminal act that lacks any of the aesthetic value of other forms of street art that are viewed as being more complex and as adhering to established criteria of taste. As Young states, "tags are often called 'scrawl' or 'scribble'; they are condemned for being illegible. Taggers are similarly criticised: news media has compared taggers to dogs urinating on lamp posts, and

taggers often get called 'vandals'" (ibid, 22). Furthermore, Young argues that it's not simply the public who view tagging as being markedly different from other forms of street art, since, during her interviews with a large range of street artists she found that even the police were more likely to be reasonable with street artists, and to overlook their activities, if they recognized the actions in question to be more "artistic" and not "simply" tagging (ibid, 103). While Banksy's works are often protected and placed under glass by the owners of the walls he has targeted (ibid, 147), taggers are regularly scorned and demonized and their engagements with public space are treated as being symptoms of urban degradation and a decline in morals. It seems that the reason for this difference in public and police attitude involves the inability to perceive in a conventional tag evidence of the art work, both in the sense of the prevailing standards of taste and the prevailing notions of labour, productivity, and technique that are used to distinguish art from non-art. Interestingly, Young states that many taggers have taken to wearing the uniforms of "municipal workers" in order to "blend into urban space" and to avoid being reported by concerned citizens or stopped by patrolling police officers (ibid, 106). While the appearance of high visibility attire is common in urban areas, and would certainly help one go undetected, what cannot go unremarked is the sense in which it is the adoption of the municipal worker's uniform as a signifier of work that helps citizens and the police to ignore the illegal activity. By cloaking their actions in the signifiers of work—whether in terms of the signifiers of artistic work or of municipal work—the graffiti artist has a greater chance of being accepted by those around them who have become conditioned to accepting labour as *the* conventional mode of comportment. In this convention, and in deploying "lazy techniques," techniques that are not already inscribed in notions of work and the logics of utility and productivity, taggers place themselves at greater risk of being reported and face greater degrees of demonization and punishment.

Contra both the majority who discuss tagging as being a form of mindless vandalism, and the minority who hold it to be a modest form of street art that needs to be understood on its own terms, we could discuss tagging as being a far more radical and interesting form of public intervention than the forms of street art that have shown clearer links to what is traditionally viewed as art. In order to explore this possibility we can engage tagging in terms of Lazzarato's notion of "lazy techniques," and, furthermore, in terms of graffiti's capacity to open us up to the constructed

nature of what is generally understood to be the unconstructed or incidental nature of "public" space. As Young has argued, the conventional conception of public spaces as spaces that are open and accessible to the public, and that exist outside of the direct influence of private enterprise, has been increasingly brought into question over recent years as the spaces that fit this description have begun to shrink greatly in number (ibid, 128). She states that

> most of the public spaces in cities such as New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Rome or Melbourne (parks, piazzas, squares, malls, streets and so on) are now privately owned. Very little publicly owned space exists; instead, communal spaces are usually licensed for public use (as long as that use does not transgress the owner's expectations of what is permissible). (ibid, 128)

Drawing on the work of Foucault and the contemporary radical geographer Nick Blomley, Young states that public space is being re-conceptualized by contemporary theorists as an "area of governmentality" in which individuals are "surveilled, regulated, policed and moved on" as opposed to spaces for open interaction and free association (ibid, 129). However, despite the existence of a contemporary theoretical critique of the concept of public space, the conventional notion of public space as being an area immune to the will of private enterprises, and of being open and accessible for the public can be seen to persist in the manner in which the majority of the public engages with urban spaces. This is to say that, despite the increasing disappearance of public spaces, as they have been traditionally perceived, the vast majority of citizens continue to think of their interactions with the architecture of cities and urban areas as if they were unmediated and open. Such an ideological engagement with the architecture of the urban is reinforced, Young argues, by the increased inclusion of "public spaces" within the production of global "livability" indices and in parliamentary political discourse more generally (ibid, 128). Indeed, what often seems to underpin the rejection of tagging and its dismissal as a crude form of vandalism is the notion that public space is fundamentally open and free and that those antisocial few who vandalize public space are effectively imposing their will on the general public. In her analysis of the criminalization of graffiti, Young quotes directly from the court transcript of a case from Western Australia in which a man who was caught tagging was sentenced to seven months imprisonment for the eight counts of criminal damage he was charged with.[15] When addressing the accused

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[15] Thankfully this ruling was overturned by the Supreme Court of Western Australia on appeal, and the man in question was instead sentenced to eighty hours of community service (ibid, 117).

directly, Magistrate Tarr, who was presiding over the case, states: "I don't understand the mentality of people who go around like you and your friends have done…. [Law-abiding citizens] come into town and see this scribble. You only have to catch the train and see the vandalism that takes place on railway stations and on the trains themselves" (ibid, 117). What this line of thinking occludes is the extent to which public space is already saturated with images and messages that the general public has not consented to, and over which they have no power. Increasingly the very train stations mentioned by Magistrate Tarr are adorned in anti-graffiti posters—many of which include representations of graffiti themselves—which are more often than not threatening and aggressive in tone, and which the public has no right to remove or alter. Therefore, despite the fact that "public spaces" are commonly privately owned, and are adorned with advertising, and function as sites for the procedures of governmentality, the ideological notion of "public space" is mobilized in order to justify the targeting of taggers and, to a lesser extent, other types of street artists.

If, however, we can suspend the habitual interpretation of the lazy techniques of the tagger as being a deficient form of artistic practice, and, can accordingly suspend the kinds of questions that would traditional follow from circumscribing tagging within a framework underpinned by the logics of utility and productivity,[16] we can then potentially see tagging as functioning to reveal the mediated nature of public space. To provide an illustration of this point we can take heed of Magistrate Tarr's observation that railways and trains are increasingly common sites for an encounter with tagging and analyze the manner in which both our experience of these spaces is organized, and the ways in which tagging can make us more aware of this construction. In his text "Uncompleted Life: The Modernist Underground," Andrew Thacker argues that within the work of many modernist writers and poets the figure of the train and the railway features as a primary metaphor for life within modernity (101-2). Thacker provides an example of this tendency when he discusses the likening in Virginia Woolf's story "The Mark on the Wall"—one of her earlier experiments in developing the "stream of consciousness method"—of the rapid movement of the train rattling through an underground tunnel with the rapidity and haphazard nature of

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[16] Which Young identifies as commonly being: "why do it?" or "what is the point?" (ibid, 21), questions that are underpinned by the assumption that tagging is a sovereign act produced by a subjectivity similar to that of the conventional artist, i.e., actions that are expressions of the inner creativity of a specialist producer.

life (ibid, 102). The train therefore provided modernist writers with a means of conceptualizing the historical changes in the interlinked process of the emergence of cultural artifacts and forms of subjectivity within modernity. While the notion of the train as the embodiment of the speed of modernity might seem quaint in light of today's technology, it is interesting to note that a notion of "freedom" is commonly used by transportation companies to maintain the relevance of the train against the competition it receives from cars and other forms of transport. One of the purported advantages of commuting or traveling by train is the extent to which the traveler is alleviated of the burdens of having to actively participate in driving or cycling, and is therefore free to surf the web, read a book, talk to friends, or simply stare out the window and relax. The notion that trains provide us with freedom, and a greater freedom than cars—which are also commonly marketed to consumers in terms of their capacity to connect the consumer to the freedom of the "open road"—both draws upon and supports the broader notion of the freedom of public space—i.e., the notion that once one enters such a space one is free from the demands and trappings associated with the family or work. However, not only are such spaces more often than not wedded to the interests of private enterprise, they also function to naturalize an association between freedom and the freedom to consume—the freedom to consume transportation, the freedom to consume your choice of entertainment as you do so, and so on. Indeed, even though we are separated from the time Woolf published "The Mark on the Wall" by almost a century, the experience of watching a static landscape fly past you as you hurtle along in train can still be an intensely invigorating experience that helps to naturalize an ideologically charged sense of the "rapidity" and "freedom" of modernity.

The tagging of train windows, often done with cheap materials such as permanent markers, or by merely scratching words into the window with a key or other sharp object, can disrupt the ideological sense of freedom that is experienced while on a train journey. While the words or symbols used may have utterly no political content, being instead fairly innocuous or meaningless to the average commuter, the mere disturbance of the otherwise uninterrupted spectacle of a seemingly passive background flittering past as a train charges through a landscape, can bring one to the construction of public space. In *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger notes that, if functioning properly, often what is mathematically closest to

us—the example Heidegger provides is a pair of spectacles resting on one's nose—will in fact be the most distant from us in our comportment towards things (H107; 104). In Heidegger's example, a viewer in a gallery looking at a painting with the aid of their glasses should not have cause to notice their glasses as their functioning allows them to slip into inconspicuousness, such that the painting—although mathematically further away than the glasses—becomes the nearest thing for the viewer (ibid, H107; 104). Similarly, so long as the window is not obstructed or distorted in some way, our awareness of it as a form of mediation and a means of framing our experience of gazing at the rapid receding of the landscape as the train passes, will most likely go unnoticed. To bring the functioning of the window as a frame or screen nearer to us requires, therefore, a shift in perspective—a looking at, rather than a looking through. Such a shift in perspective is what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan referred to as an anamorphosis, a "construction" that requires an "optical transposition" to allow for the readability of a "certain form that wasn't visible at first sight" (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 166). A tagged window, especially one that has been tagged with a scratching implement, has this anamorphic character insofar as even an incidental inscription can allow the window itself to come into view, to be wrenched from its prior inconspicuousness. Such an anamorphic shift in perspective disrupts the functioning of the train window as a screen through which we can construct and reconstruct our fantasies of modernity as a site of freedom and mobility. For Lacan, the properly anamorphic moment is that one where the aforementioned shift in perspective allows for the emergence of a hitherto "hidden reality" to come into focus (ibid, 173). This is not to say that something "realer" comes to replace the "illusion" that we took to be reality, but, instead, that the sudden shift in perspective allows us to see the multiple realities that were excluded by way of our tendency to assume that what we are familiar with and have become naturalized to *is the real as such*. Therefore, the disruption of the inconspicuousness of "public space," and the realization that the constructed but also the contestable status of public space is typically the most distant thing from us as we move through it or look through it towards something else, is made possible by the capacity of a tag to bring us to this space as something that functions in certain ways, and, perhaps most importantly, could function differently.

It might be objected that such an argument does not validate any privileging of tagging over other forms of street art or graffiti, such as the more "complex" and "artistic" works of major public figures such as Banksy or Blek le Rat. Certainly the larger works produced by these figures, usually containing recognizable figures and cultural references—and often being overtly political—can reorient one's engagement with "public space," and can serve as a reminder that public space is constructed and open to contestation. However, despite this, such works show a much greater capacity for being incorporated within the broader and pervasive cycles of work that appear almost unavoidable in our present situation. Works produced in such styles often function to naturalize the image of the artist as specialized worker and of the necessity for one to show their hard work—that they have worked hard to learn to draw, paint, or compose a picture—and their capacity to produce images and interventions that do the work conventionally allocated for the artist—i.e., providing images that please and soothe, that are cathartic even when they arouse feelings of anger and rebelliousness, or a desire for justice. Against the overt political messages of much street art it may be precisely the laziness of tagging that gives it its radical potential. The refusal of the work of the artist, the refusal to produce something that is conventionally legible or meaningful, and the withdrawal from the utilitarian logic that art should be "good for something," all inhibit a viewer's ability to get lost in the spectacular nature of much aesthetically impressive street art. Therefore, given that we rarely know who a tagger is—as they have withdrawn from the identity of the artist—or what we are meant to "do" with a tagged piece of urban space, such interventions may prompt us to think of the other possible ways of doing and acting that could be, and yet are excluded or inhibited by the productive ends towards which "public space," and therefore the subjectivities partially determined by it, have been constructed. Lastly, whether consciously or not, the tagger offers us a glimpse of the undecidability of a certain sense of sufficiency through their lazy techniques. Indeed, the public interventions of the tagger gesture towards a certain insufficiency that haunts the most seemingly self-contained and self-sufficient individual. By "insufficiency" we simply mean that the lone individual is always already "not up to it" and could never act if they were truly isolated and constituted by their volition alone. By engaging what by contemporary standards appears as an impoverished style of mark making, and by being positioned by present legal codes to affirm anonymity and a general obscurity, the tagger accepts insufficiency as the pretext for meaning to

be produced rather than an obstacle that must be overcome. While contemporary artworks are adorned with an entire institutional apparatus that provides the viewer with the injunction to engage in the work of culture, an opposite injunction to hate and despise tagging means that the actions of the tagger will always be insufficient for the task of having had an effect. Particularly, then, in a time when the ideological notions of individual freedom and the entrepreneurial subject are discussed as the only possibility for those who do not wish to suffer within the neoliberal economy, discussions of the importance of others and an acceptance of the insufficiency of the individual are perhaps more vital than ever before.

This emphasis on the sovereignty of the individual, of the need for all actions to be inextricably attached to the figure of work, and of the necessity of self-sufficiency raise the question of the violence that the valorization of work does to the thinking of community. Conventionally understood, the community is produced through the hard work of the individuals that exist within it. A community is only possible because those that live and work within it share a common goal that they work to achieve—and towards which everyone does their fair share. Indeed, there appear to be few other figures who attract so much scorn and resentment as those who seem to take advantage of the hard work of others, those idlers, welfare cheats, or "dole bludgers" who seem to simply ignore the social imperative to work that ties a community together. Attacking the lazy among us who don't seem to work hard enough has become an easy means for politicians to attain popularity with most electorates, and accordingly, the message that a newly elected government will crack down on those who refuse to work, or refuse to work hard enough or in the right way is a routine message relayed through the media. Indeed, British journalist and political analyst Owen Jones provides much evidence of the popularity that governments can obtain through displaying a callous indifference to the unemployed and underemployed when he notes that in 2008 the British government announced "plans to push 3.5 million benefit recipients into jobs" when at the very same time there were only an estimated "half a million vacancies" (*Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, 37). Jones goes on to comment that despite figures showing that "three quarters" of the British public felt that "the gap between the high and low incomes" was too high, only slightly over a third of the public supported an increase in welfare spending (ibid, 37). Furthermore, between 1986 and 2006 the number of

people surveyed who felt that unemployment was caused by "laziness or lack of will power" increased from 19% to 27% (ibid, 37).

Yet the condemnation of laziness inevitably presupposes, as a given, both the *productivity* of work, in the sense both of knowing with certainty those forms through which work is most productive, and the privileged status of work for maintaining social cohesion—even as evidence of a commitment to work serves as the basis for a form of social discrimination. Indeed, the contemporary injunction to stay vigilant so as to protect the work of the community, to be "alert but not alarmed," or to "keep calm and carry on" as the popular post-9/11 slogans go, suggests that every member of the community must tirelessly work to maintain a collective identity, for any laziness or lack of vigilance could lead to the community's demise as a self-identical whole. The question, then, that arises from our foray into the possibilities that "perhaps" could be opened up by way of our affirmation of "lazy techniques," is whether or not such an affirmation must lead to the loss of the possibility of a harmonious, whole, and self-identical community. That is effectively to ask, while "lazy techniques" gesture towards the insufficiency of the individual, and suggest the possibility of opening up a critical distance from such dominant notions of sufficiency, do they not also inhibit the community's internal compossibility? If the "lazy technique" gestures towards the insufficiency of the individual and the necessity of being-alongside others, does it not do so by way of disrupting the codes and conventions through which such a being-alongside is codified as community?

Such a problem can perhaps be negotiated by making reference to Jean-Luc Nancy's engagement with the impossibility of positively locating a work, or a form of work, that could found or sustain a community. Nancy has written that the "obsession with communion" as the heart of community is not a brute fact of the community's proper existence, but is instead one of the great motifs of fascism (*The Inoperative Community*, 17). Rather than community being threatened by a lack of vigilant work towards maintaining a communion within a community, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that this desire for communal self-identity which stamps out all difference and deviation from what is deemed productive, useful, or acceptable is that which inhibits the very thinking of the possibility of community. Beginning with the title of Nancy's primary work on the notion of community, *The Inoperative Community*, we find the word inoperative as a translation of the French "*désoeuvrée*," which literally means "idle."

While, as we have mentioned, idleness and laziness are commonly understood as antithetical to the values of a community and the community's pursuit of its shared goal, for Nancy some notion of a resistance to the idea of the community as a work—as an end-product that can be delivered through work—or to there being an essential work of the community is vital for thinking through the possibility of community itself (*The Inoperative Community*, 31-2). Nancy states that, while it is conventionally held that the "common being" of a community can be objectified and produced through "sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols, in short: in subjects," ultimately "community cannot arise from the domain of *work*" (ibid, 31). As Andrew Norris has argued, according to Nancy, to conceive of the community as a subject entails assuming that the community has "an identity immanent to it" and that, therefore, all that is needed is for such an identity to be "brought out and put to work" ("Jean-Luc Nancy on the Political," 144). Returning to the figure of fascism, Norris argues that such a conception of the immanent identity of the community is problematic because it involves a necessary "purification" of the community, a weeding out of those who do not meet the community's immanent identity such as "the sick and the foreign" who cannot be marshaled towards the work of completing the community as a work, as an end product (ibid, 145).

For Nancy it is the very experience of a lack of immanence between individuals, or, put differently, the lack of "communion," that functions as the condition for the possibility of a community that is not threatened by the violence of totalitarianism. For Nancy, true immanence, in the sense of a sensibility shared by all, would only bring about the impossibility of community and communication, insofar as that which is immanent to itself has nothing beyond itself to make contact with. "Pure identity" writes Nancy, "would not only be inert, empty, colourless, and flavourless (as those who lay claim to a pure identity so often are), it would be an absurdity" since "a pure identity cancels itself out; it can no longer identify itself" (*Being Singular Plural*, 153). According to Nancy, such an approach to community, one that would posit the existence of a perfect point of immanence between all individuals, would not only be seemingly impossible, but also deeply undesirable. Rather than emerging out of the elimination of difference, community emerges out of the production of a space of singular plurality from which a prior "being-with"— whether understood in terms of "being-with-others," "being-with-the-world," or

"being-with-myself"—can be recognized. Indeed, and to paraphrase the quote from Hölderlin that is found at the beginning of Nancy's *Being Singular Plural,* it would appear to be the lack of immanence to oneself that creates the need to share the burden of life with others. Instead, the lesson that Nancy has to teach us regarding community is that whatever we feel belongs to us—that which we feel entitled to judge, dismiss, or critique—is always already shared. Rather than attempting to reproduce any one set of values that would "correct" our present situation, we should instead look to open a communal space for possible alternatives by way of acknowledging that none of us, alone, are enough. Rather than viewing a community as built around a shared sense of work—both in the sense of meeting the demands and expectations of those around us, and of adopting a mode of comportment that "works," one that is effective and should be utilized—we could turn to a conception of community as built around a shared sense of insufficiency and laziness. By acknowledging that we always require alternatives, that no work, no matter how hard or honest it appears to be, is in itself sufficient we can better open ourselves to the possibility of sharing with each other the need to seek out different ways to live and think.

Therefore, in embracing lazy techniques, or in embracing the community as inoperative or as being unable to "work," we open ourselves up to possibilities that are excluded simply for failing to meet the conventions and expectations that demarcate work from non-work, and, therefore, we open ourselves up to the very undecidability of this disjunction of "work" from "non-work." To appeal to lazy techniques is to appeal to the possibility of resisting the context in which actions arise and through which they can be deemed moral—as work, or as something that works—or as immoral and therefore as a pejorative form of laziness or waste. Lazy techniques gesture towards the unforeseeable possibilities that are excluded by the determining influence of the contexts in which actions are performed. And yet, in turning to Nancy's notion of the community as inoperative or unworkable we must also affirm the notion of context as never fully formed, hermetically sealed, or absolutely determining. Communities, rather than being the embodiment of our sense of best practice and utility are ultimately those shared spaces of interaction that cannot be put to work and that only exist because notions of work—of what one needs to do and is expected to do—are always outstripped by contingent possibilities.

Communities are, in Nancy's view, the formation of a shared sense that what one should do cannot ever deliver enough, and that through our mutual acknowledgement of the insufficiency both of work and of attempting to perform sovereign actions, we are forced to reach out to each other.

Chapter Six:
To Err is to be Human?

It would appear to be uncontroversial to claim that a sense of optimism is vital for building and sustaining forms of political resistance. Without a sense that things can get better, or that there is hope for change and for progress, how could one possibly maintain the struggle of resistance against forms of oppression and control? Indeed, whether one looks towards contemporary political discourse, contemporary film and other forms of popular culture, or political activism, often the position valorized is that of someone who, despite moments of temporary doubt, ultimately never gives up or loses hope in the possibility of victory. There are of course more humble and "everyday" forms of optimism than those that come to be associated with political turmoil and resistance, but the phenomenon of optimism appears to lend itself to a grand or heroic mode that has a great deal of cultural purchase. By contrast, and as was first discussed in chapter three, the phenomenon of pessimism seems only to unsettle or unnerve the resolve and conviction conventionally associated with counter-hegemonic action and thought. Accordingly, while optimism is often characterized as a sensibility that can raise one beyond an everyday sense of hope or possibility towards a greatness or heroism that has "true" political import, pessimism often appears to lack such a corresponding sense of political value. Following this line of inquiry, the question we raise in this chapter, as part of our broader attempt to think through the possibility of affirming phenomena that are conventionally viewed as too simple or vulgar to have "true" political value, is whether or not pessimism could be, "perhaps," construed as resistant and ultimately emancipatory. In doing so we will look at two forms of "pessimistic" experiences or expectations—specifically failure and the possibility of extinction—in order to pose the question of their potential political status once freed from an elitist or authoritative philosophical discourse.

Žižek notes in his text *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* that one of the most pervasive responses to the 2008 financial crisis was simply to maintain that there was in fact nothing wrong with the present system

(17-19). While for many critics and commentators the global financial crisis should have been a clear display of the failure of the free-market system, a prevailing discourse of optimism was able not only to present an apologetics for the free market system, but, moreover, to argue for the need to further intensify this system by way of minimizing any subsisting state regulation (ibid, 21). As Žižek has humorously put it, the discussion of the failure of the free-market system that one finds in the accounts of "today's free market apologists" is similar to the well-known joke: "my fiancée is never late for an appointment, because the moment she is late she is no longer my fiancée" (ibid, 21). In other words, the moment that the free-market system is shown to be problematic—to give rise to mass unemployment, immense wage inequality etc.—it is revealed by neoliberal apologists that "our market economy was not a true one," and therefore that there is a need for further optimism in the status quo's ability to deliver change (ibid, 21). Mirowski makes a similar point in his *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste*, when he likens the majority of contemporary economists and supporters of neoliberalism to an extremist Christian Church from the Midwest of American known as the "Seekers," who, in the nineteen-fifties claimed that on a specific date their church would be rescued from an impending flood by flying saucers (35). When neither the flood nor the flying saucers eventuated, the Seekers, rather than becoming pessimistic and losing faith in their apocalyptic predictions, began to redouble their efforts to "expound and elaborate upon their (revised and expanded) faith" by actively engaging the media and continuing their attempts to proselytize (35-6). Like the Seekers, Mirowski argues, the failure of the free market was taken as an opportunity for mainstream economists to further celebrate the values of "neoclassical economic theory or the neoliberal tradition," pushing the message that a renewed sense of optimism was what was needed to get through a temporary moment of pause in the functioning of an otherwise successful system (ibid, 36).

The injunction to be optimistic in the face of what seems to be the systemic failure of the global financial system can be seen as wedded to the contemporary rise and ubiquity of the concept of "resilience," a concept that places an emphasis on individuals to overcome some systemic problems—which are typically too large and complex for individuals to control or even influence—while providing an injunction for other systemic problems to be received by individuals as natural and therefore unavoidable. In his article "Resisting Resilience," the philosopher and political

theorist Mark Neocleous argues that over the last decade the concept of resilience has become

> one of the key political categories of our time. It falls easily from the mouths of politicians, a variety of state departments are funding research into it, urban planners are now obliged to take it into consideration, and academics are falling over themselves to conduct research on it. (n.p.)

Neocleous argues that "resilience" has become a crucial concept in international relations, security and counter-terrorism, climate science, and economics, insofar as preparation for an imminent crisis—whether in terms of security, economy, or ecology—has become increasingly a feature of contemporary governance (ibid, n.p.). Neocleous further links the current ubiquity of the concept of resilience to contemporary forms of governance when he turns to the production of "resilient subjects" in the wake of increasingly "insecure" nation-states and a precarious global capitalism (ibid, n.p.). On Neocleous's account, the "good" resilient subject must be able to "survive and thrive in any situation," be able to find a "balance" between working "several insecure and part-time jobs," and have an almost limitless capacity to "overcome life's hurdles" such as "facing retirement without a pension […] cuts to benefits, wage freezes or global economic meltdown" (ibid, n.p.). Indeed, Neocleous goes as far as stating that "neoliberal citizenship" can be made effectively synonymous with "a training in resilience as the new technology of the self: a training to withstand whatever crisis capital undergoes and whatever political measures the state carries out to save it" (ibid, n.p.). Such training is not limited to the functioning of traditional institutions of power, however, since, as the philosopher Robin James has shown in *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, and Neoliberalism*, contemporary popular culture is awash with representations of resilience, or what James refers to as "Look, I Overcame!" moments where "good" subjectivities are constructed on the basis of a capacity for exhibiting the individual qualities of self-mastery and resilience to systemic violence (78-83). For James, contemporary popular music produced by figures such as Lady Gaga and Beyoncé—and we can also add contemporary advertising such as Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign—function to interpellate those who most frequently suffer from systemic violence—i.e., women, people of colour, and homosexuals—with the necessity of being resilient in an inhospitable world (ibid, 78-83; 132-35). Taking the example of the production of the resilient female subject, such cultural texts present women as being damaged by

patriarchy—physically, emotionally, or both—but then position the viewer to accept a resilient and defiant response as being the appropriate way to achieve the status of a "good" feminist subject (ibid, 82-4). This is not to say that empowerment or resilience does not actually produce subjects better suited to systemic violence, but, instead, that these neoliberal or resilient subjects can become better suited to inhospitable conditions only through the inhibition of their capacity to organize politically and refuse mechanisms of governmentality. "Resilience wants acquiescence, not resistance," writes Neocleous, and while the logic of resilience certainly demands that the subject be active, this activity must function so as to accommodate "capital and the state, and the secure future of both, rather than to resist them" (ibid, n.p.). Indeed, the risk that the injunction to be resilient poses is that, in producing subjects who are suited to prolonged periods of precariousness and instability, the contemporary discourse of resilience will function to dissimulate, if not efface, forms of exploitation, subjugation, and control.

However, the injunctions to be optimistic about the global financial system's efficacy, and to be resilient as we wait ever longer for the free market to truly arrive, are far from the only examples we can give of a kind of hegemony of optimism. For a further example, we can look to the prevalence of the phenomena of "emotional labour"—i.e., work in which employees are expected to draw upon or simulate feelings such as happiness or joviality in their interactions with customers or other employees—particularly in low-paid work. While it would be seemingly impossible to separate emotions entirely from the labour process, there are nevertheless forms of employment in which displays of pleasure, happiness, or enjoyment would conventionally be deemed as unnecessary or superfluous to the "proper" functioning of the employee. However, workers in low paid positions, such as fast food workers, are burdened with the expectation to simulate and perform feelings of happiness and frivolity in their interactions with customers and other workers. In his text *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire*, the economist Frédéric Lordon discusses the neoliberal "girlfriend experience,"[17] a phrase used to refer to the increased expectation for workers to engage in emotional labour. As an example of this phenomenon Lordon writes of Indian call centre workers who are expected to

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[17] Lordon adopts this phrase from a form of sex work in which women will engage their clients, or at least simulate, a more emotionally open form of interaction that would be akin to certain expectations an individual may have of a girlfriend or partner.

learn the accents, idioms, and culture of their foreign clients so as to make themselves more relatable and therefore to improve the overall customer experience (81-2). He writes further that some employees are becoming enjoined to "completely surrender their affectivity" in their work, insofar as they are asked to "laugh or play games on command" (ibid, 81). Examples of emotional labour are not restricted to non-Western workers, however. In early 2015 the McDonald's fast food company launched its "Pay With Lovin'" campaign, in which customers were opened up to the random chance of receiving their meal for free on the condition that they were willing to perform an act of happiness such as high-fiving the staff, singing, dancing, or calling a family member and confessing their love for them in-store. However, and as the journalist Bryce Covert notes, such emotional labour is not simply being passed on to the customer, since it would be almost inconceivable to imagine McDonald's tolerating their staff resisting this performed happiness by remaining deadpan or by even looking uncomfortable whilst a customer danced or expressed their love for their mother in order to attain free food ("A Job at McDonald's Now Includes Singing and Dancing On Demand," n.p.). Similarly, Paul Myerscough writes in the *London Review of Books* that the sandwich chain Pret A Manger employs "mystery shoppers" for the purpose of monitoring the perceived happiness of employees, and to allow the company to reward and punish employees based on their capacity to imbue their work with the correct affects of happiness and jubilation ("Short Cuts," 25).

Given these affective conditions—the widespread appeal to "optimism," as a rhetorical means for defending presently existing power relations; the power of the discourse of "resilience," to produce depoliticized subjects who understand systemic violence as a natural occurrence to be simply endured; the prescription of a demeanour of "light-heartedness" and "happiness" as work duties in many poorly-paid and grueling forms of employment—perhaps there is a greater need than ever to seriously consider the possibility for pessimistic thinking to function as a means of resisting contemporary power relations, and for opening up the space for alternatives. If the injunction to be optimistic can function as a means of maintaining the status quo and prevailing formations of power, that is, then pessimism may well turn out to operate as a genuinely important mode of resistance, particularly at times when the optimistic attachment to certain narratives—be they political, social, or economic—functions to inhibit or exclude other possibilities. This is not to suggest that feelings

of hopelessness, guilt, or despondence ought to be privileged as the most appropriate dispositions in the face of crisis, nor to say that optimism is *a priori* a sign of social oppression. Undoubtedly, optimism remains a legitimate mode of comportment, and one that we surely rely upon in any account of a meaningful human life. Undoubtedly, too, under certain conditions and in certain forms, a pessimistic commitment to feelings of despair, anguish, and disappointment risks a great deal of political, emotional, even physical pain, and so it would be rash to fetishize pessimism under the auspices of radicality. But to the extent that certain forms of "positivity"—for instance, a sense of belief in the supposedly infinite capacity for the individual to overcome and sublate even the worst experiences into something meaningful and positive—have become normalized not simply as banal injunctions about how to live ("Give us a smile"; "Don't worry, be happy") but as the diffuse mechanisms of something akin to a governmentality, perhaps the critical or resistive potential of the pessimistic severing of attachments warrants further investigation. Indeed, perhaps forms of negative phenomena and pessimistic dispositions may themselves serve as the basis for the emergence of new forms of optimistic attachment and optimistic affect. It is in order to explore such a possibility, then, that we turn to two distinct but interconnected images of pessimism and despondency—failure and extinction—and consider their potential to point towards a certain undecidability, insofar as optimistic forms of affirmation may issue from the pessimistic and negative affects of depression and despair thus raising the question of the self-identity and self-containment of notions of optimism and pessimism.

As the contemporary queer theorist Judith Halbertsam—also known as J. Jack Halberstam—has argued, within a contemporary economic and social order that equates success with material accumulation and heteronormative reproduction, the radical political potential of failure needs to be explored (*The Queer Art of Failure*, 2-3). Against the optimistic attempt to further accommodate the powerful injunctions for success and self-betterment that are issued from institutions, social and mass media, and the family, an acceptance of failure and frustration stands as an anathema to contemporary Western culture. While the drive for success has now long been entrenched within the school, office, university, and sporting arena, increasingly narratives of success—of its promise and its necessity—have become fundamental to the ways in which we make sense of our lives under late capitalism. Perhaps the most

recent example of this trend towards thinking life in terms of degrees of success is the rise of reality television competitions such as *The Biggest Loser*, *MasterChef Australia*, and *The Block*, which invite viewers to compete with one another for the opportunity to enter into a televised competition in which a small number of contestants struggle to best each other in game-show style reinterpretations of domestic situations. Working out at the gym, cooking a meal for one's family, or decorating and renovating a house are all conventional domestic situations that would be traditionally excluded from the competitive success and failure narratives of work or education. However, in these immensely popular contemporary reality shows, contestants who have already competed with one another to get onto the show struggle further for the opportunity to change their lives through the acquisition of large cash prizes. While these programs are obviously produced for light entertainment purposes, they nevertheless function to naturalize an association between a certain representation of domestic normality and competition and the struggle for success. Such programs present working on one's home, enjoying exercise, and cooking not merely as activities of affective-intensity and fulfillment, but as potential sites of success, arenas in which one can show their dominance and rise above failure to claim material wealth and status.

Moreover, in the United States the post-GFC fallout appears to have given rise to a new style of reality television program dedicated to the trials and tribulations of a series of individuals who attempt to hone their skills and find profit in a crumbling economy. 2010 saw the premier of *Hardcore Pawn*, *Storage Wars*, and *American Pickers*, three shows that all centre on protagonists—supposedly "real people" like you or I—who struggle to make a profit from the purchase of foreclosed storage lockers (*Storage Wars*), from working in the second hand retail and loan industry (*Hardcore Pawn*), or from attempting to locate overlooked treasure in private collections for the purposes of on-selling in the antique and second hand market (*American Pickers*). Such shows abound with representations of the supposed resilience of self-determining individuals who find the economic crisis to be simply an opportunity. Stories of individual misery insist at the fringes of these programs, but the main narrative arc is always fixed on the ingenuity and resilience of the protagonists against a world that is simultaneously crumbling and exposing its treasures to an industrious few. Particularly in *Hardcore Pawn*, in which the

protagonists are regularly filmed entering into antagonistic relations with Detroit's working poor, and in *Storage Wars* where the empty reclaimed storage units that the protagonists bid on cannot but stand as a haunting reminder of the fallout of the GFC, there is an uncomfortable sense that the sovereign entrepreneurialism exhibited by the protagonists is conditioned by systemic misery and exploitation. However, such a pessimistic sensibility is kept at the fringes of programs that are largely framed in terms of narratives of personal success, individual reliance, and the inexhaustibility of the American dream of self-determination, success, and happiness.

Against the ever increasing drive towards success, and the pernicious optimism that underpins this drive, then, Halberstam suggests that we look towards failure as a means of escaping from "the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development" (ibid, 3). The negative feelings of "disappointment, disillusionment, and despair" provide, on Halberstam's account, an opportunity to "poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (ibid, 3). Promoted through a massively lucrative self-help industry, Halberstam notes that the supposed benefits of staying positive, whether through a terminal illness or bankruptcy, circulate as a form of common sense that can function both to mask and inhibit the "gross inequalities of everyday life" and to exclude certain existential and conceptual possibilities (ibid, 4). Viewing failure as normal, while being undoubtedly pessimistic, opens up excluded possibilities insofar as it can better enable us to reveal the often-violent conditions necessary for a seemingly clear demarcation between failure and success to be possible. As Halberstam argues, every success must inevitably bring about failure, especially within a capitalist economy, insofar as scarcity, exclusion, and exploitation appear inextricably caught up with the functioning of the capitalist economy (ibid, 88). Despite this inevitability, failure is often reduced to what Halberstam refers to as a "hidden history of pessimism," an unofficial and unwanted history that is excluded in order to allow for the optimistic story of success, triumph, and greatness, to be perceived as normal, attainable, and desirable (ibid, 88). By accepting and affirming failure, both conceptually and in terms of praxis, the possibilities offered by this hidden history can be drawn upon as a means of liberating oneself from the immense pressure to overcome what are in fact considerable obstacles and impositions in order to have "made something of oneself," to have become both successful and an embodiment of the viability of a culture of optimism.

One example of the ways in which failure can help to reveal the very structure of what constitutes success is the "TEDx" talk "2070 Paradigm Shift" presented by comedian Sam Hyde at Drexel University in 2013. TEDx, which is an offshoot of the hugely popular TED (Technology Entertainment Design) talks, provides an opportunity for countries outside of the United States to organize, in accordance with TED standards and procedures, a similar experience of conferences centred on innovation and lateral thinking. Hyde's presentation was an ironic performance of a failed TED talk, taking the conventional elements of the genre and revealing them as artificially codified, and reproducible by purposefully failing to re-produce them effectively. TED talks are famous for their emphasis on inspirational ideas, entertaining presentations, and brevity, with each speaker being given a maximum of eighteen minutes to present. As the contemporary theorist Benjamin Bratton notes, given the succinct nature of the TED talk, the "key rhetorical device" that consistently recurs in the format is the "combination of epiphany and personal testimony […] through which the speaker shares a personal journey of insight and realization, its triumphs and tribulations" ("We Need To Talk About TED," n.p.). Hyde's presentation played on this wedding of personal testimony with supposedly cutting-edge knowledge in a number of ways, such as his ridiculous clothing, which was more that of a roman centurion than the usual business attire of a TED speaker; his mockery of the constructed identity of a TED presenter, referring to himself at one point as a "creator, innovator, artist, idea" and "passionate childlike playful innovator"; and his frequent gesturing towards being an unreliable narrator of his own story and message ("2070 Paradigm Shift," n.p.). Indeed, at one point Hyde launches into an anecdote about his personal experience at a "second tier" university where he witnessed the power of the confluence of great ideas and unflinching conviction:

> I was in a class and there was a student in that class, ok. The teacher, he was spouting some horrible nonsense about how, it was something about how women's rights are not legitimate. Something everybody knew was false, but if anybody had spoken up, he would have taken extreme joy in failing them, ok. Nobody spoke up. One person raised his voice. One person started talking. The teacher couldn't believe it. The classroom couldn't believe it either. But in the end he had logic on his side, and at the end of the day he proved his point. That student was Albert Einstein. (ibid)

Hyde's example sticks to the familiar epiphany-testimony structure that Bratton argues is so fundamental to the TED talk genre, beginning with a familiar and relatable problem—the recalcitrance of traditional power structures—and a

triumphant "eureka" moment that personally changes the speaker—as when the student whose identity has been hidden thus far shows the power of speaking truth to authority. This narrative becomes undone with a humorous twist in chronology when it is revealed that the great twentieth century physicist Albert Einstein—who died a good thirty years or more before Sam Hyde was born—was the student who silenced the teacher by simply appealing to logic. While Hyde here could be read as simply thumbing his nose at the TED format by dressing inappropriately and speaking in absurdities, his failure to properly function as a TED-style speaker helps to reveal what counts as success in this hugely popular format. While we all know that a suit and tie is a kind of costume that is worn to give the appearance of dignity and self-mastery, and we know that spontaneous "eureka" moments lose all their spontaneity and become mediated when retrospectively constructed by a trained public speaker, we nevertheless act as if we do not know these things and continue to be inspired by such talks even if "deep down" we would regard ourselves as being more cynical. Žižek makes precisely this point in his text *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, where he argues that the assumption that ideology is restricted to the world of ideas and values—to internal personal perspectives and beliefs—is deeply misleading (27-8). For Žižek, to locate ideology purely in the realm of "knowing" involves the exclusion of the material element of ideology, that is, the way in which ideological structures are already embodied in the world of actions and objects (ibid, 28). Not only this, but to the extent that I "know" that a particular action or social formation is ideologically underpinned—that it wrests on historical and cultural contingencies that could be challenged and made otherwise—I give myself permission to continue encountering these actions and formations as if they were entirely natural and non-ideological, as if, to paraphrase Žižek, I did not "know" (ibid, 30). So, when someone says to me, "don't you know that Ken Robinson is spouting rehearsed platitudes, and that his whole image has been tailored by a team of professionals?" I can simply acknowledge that "I obviously know this," and go back to enjoying the talk as if I didn't.

Accordingly, in failing to deliver a successful presentation, in literally wearing a (roman centurion) costume, in embellishing his anecdotes to make them transparently constructed, and in speaking in clichés that are slightly wrong—as when Hyde refers to himself as an artist, creator, innovator, and an impersonal "idea"— Hyde is able to help us confront those things that we "know" and yet suspend in our

comportment. That Hyde's ironic intervention could supply us with such a failed attempt at a successful TED talk, that he could get it "so wrong," helps to reveal to us how manufactured and atypical the optimism, passion, and heartfelt conviction of the "successful" TED talk is. TED speakers such as the educationalist Ken Robinson, the social psychologist Amy Cuddy, and the leadership expert Simon Sinek—all of whose talks have been watched over twenty million times each on the official TED website—invoke a sense of personal conviction and honest passion, such that their presentations appear unmediated insofar as they "touch us," insofar as they seem to literally push through what is often posited as the superficiality of mass media so as to speak to us in a way that is direct and meaningful. Yet when Hyde states boldly and with a profound sense of purpose that what inspires him is "teaching African refugees how to use JavaScript […and] finding out how to use maglev trains to get resources to the Moon" because "these are the challenges that tomorrow's going to face," we are faced with what we know and yet what our actions belie: that the inspirational speeches, optimistic revelations, and crowd pleasing innovations of TED can only function within a heavily demarcated space, within which notions of success and failure are stringently policed.

Perhaps what is most effective about Hyde's performance is its lack of a cohesive and constructive message. Rather than attempting to explain what is problematic about TED, or what an alternative to TED could look like, Hyde's performance seems to function more along the lines of a negative interruption within a dominant media platform's circulation of optimistic narratives of technological triumph and synergetic corporate success. However, does Hyde really open up a critical space that has been inhibited by mainstream media platforms? Is it not the case that pessimistic media texts circulate just as widely as that of their optimistic counterparts? Indeed, it may at first seem counterintuitive, if not blatantly untrue, that in the contemporary world of global mass media we lack opportunities to experience pessimism. Indeed, it is now almost inconceivable to encounter a news cycle—via digital television, twitter, or some other platform—that isn't awash with footage and testimony related to violence, destruction, and horror. However, despite the abundance of shocking and confronting images and phrases perpetually circulating through different forms of media, can we say that such exposure to the horrific and brutal provides us with a space in which to sit with feelings of negativity and

pessimism? While one is exposed daily to events that are potentially despair-inducing, the sheer frequency with which we are exposed to such material surely inhibits our capacity to disrupt the intensities of media temporalities—the sheer speed at which horrific events are encoded and recoded through reporting, editorializing, and the various channels for commentary available online and otherwise. Furthermore, the speed at which horrific events are reported is not the only potential inhibitor of our capacity to meaningfully work through and share the pessimism associated with the reporting of violence and trauma. Concomitant with the prevalence of contemporary news media is an underlying ideological construction of our relation to information, which is evinced in the very way in which news media is framed for and advertised to consumers. Examples of this framing can be found in the recent advertising campaign by the major news media outlet CNN Worldwide (the international arm of the Cable News Network). In 2014 CNN worldwide launched their brand campaign "Go There" with a promotional video comprised of a montage of news footage depicting scenes of destruction and jubilation from around the world, and accompanied by an audio narration. The narration states to the viewer

> Choose to go. Go where no one has gone before. Where no one else will go today. You can go in search of answers, only to find more questions. You might discover something unfamiliar halfway around the world, or uncover something unexpected much closer to home. Sometimes you might need to look back to see how you got here, and where you might be headed. And just when you think your journey's reached an end, you'll be surprised to find it's only just beginning. But you'll keep going, because it's your journey. Wherever it goes.

Such advertising appears to offer a reading position in which notions of spectatorship, freedom, choice, and adventure are adjoined. Given that news media are highly ubiquitous and, accordingly, interwoven with the daily life of the majority of people living in the Western world, the extent to which the consumption of news involves "choosing" in the manner that "Go There" suggests is debatable and arguably reveals an ideological presentation of information as being emancipating and exciting. As Dardot and Laval have argued, a key feature of the neoliberal economy is the emphasis on "risk" as a concept that underpins all social relations (*The New Way of the World*, 276). In the process of forming neoliberal subjectivities, Dardot and Laval argue, the neoliberal economy must pass on the uncertainty and precariousness of economic situations—which are generally produced by decentralized structural effects rather than the decisions of individuals—onto the neoliberal subject, reframing

the negative effects that a pernicious market has on the individual as being reducible to the risks taken or not taken by that individual (ibid, 276). Indeed, Dardot and Laval provide a succinct formulation for this neoliberal ideological imperative when they state that, within the neoliberal economy, "to follow one's desires is to run risks" (ibid, 276). In a similar vein, CNN's framing of news media consumption as pertaining to the risky business where one seeks answers, but perhaps only finds more questions, or where one takes the risk to "go where no one has gone before," "where no one else will go today," presents the viewer with the injunction to consume news media in order to meet a social expectation of being adventurous and risk-seeking. Moreover, while it is perfectly understandable that it has long been a practice in news media to warn the viewer prior to displaying graphic content, such warnings function to present the burden of having watched or not watched solely on the viewer. Indeed, there is undoubtedly a sense of guilt and trauma, albeit different kinds, attached to looking *and to looking away*—to bearing the weight of having to look, or of failing to perform one's duty to look. Since it is not as simple as merely "choosing" to look or not—given that one never decides to be put in the position of having to make such a "choice"—such warnings cannot help but function to cast the viewer in the ideological position of absolutely assuming the risk of having to bear witness, or of having to withdraw from violence and devastation.

However, alongside this specific injunction to be a "risk-taker," as well as the neoliberal ideologies associated with it, there can be found what is perhaps a more basic ideological injunction for the viewer to be beholden to news media *on command*. That is to say, despite the rhetoric of choice that is used in this piece of advertising, a specific sense of duty or obligation seems to underpin one's engagement with news media. Indeed, in the "Go There" voice-over narrative there is an interesting movement between the orders of the actual and the possible, insofar as the viewer is addressed at certain moments in terms of a grammar of the possible— making use of the suggestive verb "could"—and at other moments in a form that is either explicitly or implicitly commanding. The narrator begins with an imperative ("choose to go") rather than an option. Only on arriving at this "place" of news media adventure—where no one has gone before or where no one is willing to go today— the viewer is addressed in terms of possibilities, "you can go in search of answers […] You might discover something unfamiliar […]." However, this grammar of

possibility quickly returns to a fatalistic grammar of the actual, since, "just when you think your journey reached an end, you'll be surprised to find its only just beginning. But you'll keep going, because it's your journey. Wherever it goes." Here the viewer is addressed as one who must return again and again to this site of risk and adventure, of horror and amusement, regardless of how close one thinks they are to the end of these cycles. The implication in the penultimate line, "but you'll keep going, because it's your journey," implies the assumption of a subjectivity beholden to seeking, pursuing, and above all continuing on a path that has already be opened up.

What news media advertising, TED talks, and the aforementioned popular reality television programs seem to share, is the presence of an underlying injunction to disassociate risk, failure, and misery from systemic conditions—thereby associating them with the individual's purported power to choose—and to locate the proper place of failure along a trajectory that leads towards success. This is to say that, time and again within our present culture we can find examples of the construction of individual failure, and other pessimistic phenomena, as something particular to the individual in question and as part of their transformation into a "normal" and successful person. Potentially then, the capacity to affirm, or to say "perhaps" to failure, would involve the attempt to resist the cultural norms that demarcate notions of success, failure, and value, whilst also attempting to resist the cultural imperative to endlessly seek out success as if this were both obtainable and preferable. While such an affirmation of failure could be misinterpreted in terms of an attitude of resignation, from which one comes to simply accept themselves and their situation without qualification—i.e., to simply accept that one is "already a failure," thereby undermining any reason to struggle to improve or change things—following Halberstam, we can see the affirmation of failure as involving something more like a suspension of the very logic of success that casts failure as a derisory phenomena, and as subsidiary to an awaiting success.

If, then, we can make a case for the affirmation of failure insofar as it provides the possibility for opening up new critical spaces for thinking, the question remains as to the limits of such an affirmation. Particularly in the face of the potential catastrophe of global warming, a sense of optimism that moves beyond affirmation and the spirit of "perhaps" and which instead optimistically declares the reality of redemption and deliverance for terrestrial life, seems utterly necessary. As Colebrook (*Death of the*

PostHuman), Eugene Thacker (*In The Dust of this Planet*), and Lee Edelman (*No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*) have argued, the last decade or so has seen a return of the popularity of disaster and post-apocalyptic films in which an immense crisis befalls humanity only for redemption to arrive—or at least be gestured towards—before the credits roll. As Colebrook has argued, much contemporary disaster and post-apocalyptic cinema involves something akin to what Sigmund Freud referred to as the *Fort-Da* game, in which an object of trauma—in this case the human race itself—is made to disappear and then to reappear (*Death of the PostHuman*, 187). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud observed that his grandson played a game with a "wooden spool" attached to a piece of string, in which, string in hand, the child would throw the spool away whilst crying making an "o-o-o-o" sound that Freud interpreted as *Fort*, the German word for "gone" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 57). Once the spool had disappeared from sight, the child would pull on the piece of string until the spool was back in his possession, and, once so, the child would triumphantly announce "*Da*" or "there," signaling a recognition of the spool's return (ibid, 57). On Freud's account, such an act represented a means for the child's mastery over a painful situation—the occasional absence of his mother—in that the act of throwing away and retrieving the spool, which Freud took to be a stand-in for the mother, allowed the child to simulate being in control of his mother's absence and return (ibid, 58-9) Furthermore, the game allowed for the child to get revenge on the mother for causing the child pain (ibid, 58). As Freud states, throwing the spool away appeared to have a "defiant meaning" insofar as it allowed the child to say, "well, then, go away! I don't need you. I'll send you away myself" (ibid, 59). For Colebrook, a similar fantasy of mastery and revenge occurs in contemporary disaster and post-apocalyptic fiction, insofar as films like *2012* and *The Day After Tomorrow* allow the viewer to oversee the destruction of the human race from a safe vantage point, whilst also allowing a revenge fantasy against an irresponsible industrial humanity to be fulfilled (*Death of the PostHuman*, 187). Moreover, despite the spectacular nature of the destruction and carnage unleashed upon humanity in these films, the "*Da*" portion of the game—i.e., the moment of retrieval—is typically fulfilled in the concluding sections, when a gesture towards the possibility of redemption and renewal is revealed (ibid, 192). Indeed, and as Eugene Thacker notes, such films are apocalyptic in the eschatological sense, insofar as they entail both the

destruction of humanity and its figurative resurrection through some redemptive power (*In The Dust of This Planet*, 121).

Both Colebrook and Edelman have discussed the significance of the child as a symbol of hope and renewal in major contemporary post-apocalyptic cinema such as *The Road*—based on the popular Cormac McCarthy novel of the same name—and *Children of Men*—based on the less popular novel by P.D. James, also of the same name. Both of these works begin after the disaster has taken place, with no concrete explanation of why human civilization has broken down in the particular manner that it has. As Colebrook argues what makes these films typical of their time is that they are entirely plausible despite their lack of exposition, which is to say that, in our present situation, the possibility of massive ecological devastation and the destruction of human civilization as we know it is simply a plausible state of affairs (*Death of the PostHuman*, 89). In the film adaptation of *The Road*, we find ourselves following the misfortunes of a nameless man and his son, who move through a barren landscape that is often devoid of even traces of civilization, an empty and desolate horizon of grey ash within which even flora and fauna seems disquietingly absent. Over the course of the film the man and his son struggle to survive amidst gangs of looters, cannibals, and utterly inhospitable surroundings. At all times the nameless man carries a pistol with two rounds, both of which are saved in reserve in case he and his son need the respite of suicide. After killing a member of a gang of marauders who stumbled upon the pair the man has to contemplate killing his son, but fortunate circumstances—or misfortunate ones, depending on how one views the nature of their struggle to survive—prevents him from needing to do so. In the film's final act the man dies after killing an ambusher who nevertheless manages to mortally wound him with an arrow, and, in an ambiguous concluding scene, the boy is approached by another family of downtrodden survivors who state that they have been following the man and the boy, and claim further that they have revealed themselves so as to incorporate the boy into their own family and rescue him. *The Road*, much like the book it is based on, is a stark and terse work of tension and despair—very little happens in either the book or film version, and what little happens is brutal and horrific. Despite the overall pessimism of this text, and the grim forecast it makes for the future of the human race, the ending suggests the possibility of renewal and redemption. As Colebrook argues, the boy's integration with a new family suggests

the possibility of the reformations of new bonds and a hope for future solidarity and survival (ibid, 89). While this is perhaps an optimistic reading of the ending, which could just as easily be seen as signaling a grisly fate for the boy—in that the persistent threat of abuse and even cannibalism provides no warrant for assuming that the newcomers' overture is made in good faith—the fact that it is a family that approaches the boy at the end, and not a lone stranger or a group of childless individuals, marks the ending with a sense of familial continuance. Perhaps it is not the nameless boy who will live, carrying on the legacy of his father and making good on the latter's sacrifices as he does so, but even if he is to be killed by the family that "rescues" him, this death appears inextricably linked to the survival of another family, and of another line of posterity. Therefore, whether the man sacrifices his life for the future of his son, or whether the family will sacrifice the boy for the future of their own children, the film ends with the message that sacrifices can and must be made so that a future steeped in the present can struggle to survive—an ending that is both hopeful and yet haunted by the possibility of murder and violence.

Similarly, if not also more conspicuously, *Children of Men* engages with the child as an embodiment of futurity and hope insofar as it takes place in a future human world in which the global fertility rate has dropped to zero. The inability for children to be born robs humanity of any hope for the future and, as a result, societies all over the world break down into violence and chaos. Britain, which appears to be governed by a brutal fascistic regime, claims to be the last stable society on earth, offering its citizens protection from refugees by way of routine acts of persecution and violence, and comfort from a seemingly meaningless existence in the form of anti-depressants and a euthanasia drug known as "quietus." The film's protagonist, former-activist-turned-bureaucrat Theo Faron, lives out his days without hope or conviction in the possibility of a future, witnessing government cruelty, civil unrest, and daily tragedies. The film opens with a crowd of people—including police officers and civilians—gathered in a café watching the televised reportage of the death of the "youngest person on the planet," an eighteen-year-old man who is stabbed to death after spitting into the face of a crazed fan who asks him for an autograph. Amidst the crowd of distressed onlookers is Theo, who watches the news report unmoved, staying long enough to collect his take-away coffee and to hear that the man responsible for the death of the "youngest person on the planet" was beaten to death

by an angry mob, news that seems to have simply no effect on Theo. Later in the film Theo confesses that

> I can't really remember when I last had any hope, and I certainly can't remember when anyone else did either. Because really, since women stopped being able to have babies, what's left to hope for? (*Children of Men*, n.p.)

Theo's pessimism and sense of malaise is disrupted, however, when he is contacted by his former wife Julian, who has become involved with a radical underground sect that is attempting to smuggle a pregnant female refugee named Kee—the only pregnant woman on Earth—out of Britain and into the hands of the "Human Project," a group of scientists, technicians, and intellectuals that are purportedly attempting to create a new society. Theo is sought out because of his contacts with the government and his ability to acquire means of getting Kee out of the country. *Children of Men* ends, not unlike *The Road*, on an ambiguous note, with Kee holding her baby and Theo clutching a flowing bullet wound, both huddled in a small boat a few miles outside of Britain. Theo eventually dies from loss of blood, but his sacrifice appears to have been fruitful as a Human Project ship, adorned with the word "tomorrow" written across its hull, moves into shot through fog and mist to collect Kee and her child. As with *The Road*, it is unclear whether this means that humanity has been saved, or whether Kee, Theo, and Julian, have been manipulated into handing over the only living child to a group potentially as insidious as the British government they have struggled to escape from. Either way it is impossible to miss the manner by which the film contrasts the brutality, selfishness, and meaninglessness of adult society with the redemptive force of the child as a symbol of rebirth. Or, as Lee Edelman states, *Children of Men* ends "as anyone not born yesterday surely expects from the start, with the renewal of our barren and dying race through the miracle of birth" (*No Future*, 12).

What is apparent in both of these films is their reproduction of a fall and redemption narrative. Such films seem to accord with a contemporary climate of guilt that surrounds the ensuing global catastrophe of global warming. Indeed, just as with *Children of Men* and *The Road*, the contemporary discourse on global warming seems to be predominated by pessimism and bleakness, as it is attached to the seeming inevitability of extinction and supplemented by an optimistic appeal to the possibility for avoiding catastrophe by way of a species-wide form of renewal and redemption. Indeed, despite the extreme nature of the risk represented in the scientific modeling of

the effects of global warming, discussions of impending ecological devastation within the sphere of politics and activism are conventionally optimistic and hopeful, speaking to the immense possibilities that lie dormant within the figure of a united global humanity. As the literary theorist David A. Collings has indicated in his text *Stolen Future, Broken Present: The Human Significance of Climate Change*, "nearly every book on climate change has ended on an optimistic note, explaining how this crisis is ultimately an opportunity, a chance to turn things around, to create an environmentally friendly economy and a newly responsible society" (12). Such responses appear to be contemporary forms of the myth of "original sin," insofar as they reaffirm the centuries-old notion that the human subject is born fundamentally flawed and fallen, but with the capacity—if not the destiny—to reach a state of salvation. Simon Critchley has argued that, while for many the "idea of original sin" is simply an "outdated relic from the religious past" it is instead a conceptual expression of a sense of a "fundamental experience of ontological defectiveness" that underpins many modern attempts to explain the "human propensity towards error, malice, wickedness, violence, and extreme cruelty" (*The Faith of the Faithless*, 108).

Perhaps the most startling example of this notion's persistence in contemporary culture can be found in the work of the hugely popular biologist and contemporary atheist Richard Dawkins. Dawkins, who is renowned for his popular and acerbic views on religion, is well known for opposing religious views as being a kind of mental illness from which the world must be alleviated. Despite this, and as James Boyce has argued in his text *Born Bad: Original Sin and the Making of the Western World*, Dawkins's views on both genetic and cultural or "memetic" inheritance appear to be grounded, albeit unconsciously, in the narrative of fall and redemption. Boyce argues that in texts such as *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins developed the argument that the fundamental characteristic of successful genes is simply self preservation through reproduction, and that, following this logic, all behaviours and beliefs are a product of such "selfish" imperatives (*Born Bad*, 327). This is not to say, Boyce clarifies, that Dawkins's account leaves no room for the possibility of altruistic behaviour, but, rather, that such actions are rare and fundamentally contradict human nature (ibid, 328). Just as the gene is, on Dawkins account, a unit of selfish self-replication, the meme—which is Dawkins's term for literally anything culturally produced—is similarly beholden to a logic of selfish self-reproduction (ibid, 335). For

Dawkins, "bad" memes like religion continue to reproduce themselves not because they are of any worth to those who act as vessels for them—indeed, Dawkins is quoted several times in Boyce's text as declaring that religious beliefs and other mythological systems, such as those held by the first peoples of Australia, are "worthless"—but merely because the "meme" pushes the host towards actions that will maintain its self-replication (ibid, 335-40). For Dawkins, there is a need for humanity to overcome its genetic and memetic tendency towards selfish actions that serve the units of reproducibility that exist through us, and it is this discussion of the possibility of overcoming our genetic and memetic "fallenness" that Boyce locates as evidence for a striking parallel between Dawkins's thought and that of a medieval Christian theologian such as Augustine (335). Dawkins, who is conventionally held to be the absolute antithesis to a religious thinker, produces, Boyce argues, an account of human existence that centres on humans as being fundamentally fallen in character and with only one possible means to salvation—i.e., accepting the dogma of scientific reason (ibid, 335-6). Boyce writes, moreover, that perhaps the reason why accounts like Dawkins's, which present human beings as fundamentally predisposed towards "violence, selfishness, greed and looking after their own … whether family, tribe or nation," are so publicly well received is because they simply represent archetypal knowledge in a modern guise (ibid, 344-45). Indeed, while the former director of the National Center for Human Genome Research is quoted in Boyce's text as refuting the claim that genes can be understood to have a substantive impact on human behaviour, Boyce argues that the pervasive willingness in contemporary culture to accept the notion of the "selfish gene" is evidence of the centrality of the fall and redemption narrative in the Western secular world (ibid, 345-47).

Given the ubiquity of the fall and redemption narrative as a means of making sense of ourselves and of events, it is unsurprising that the discourse surrounding ecological crisis and global warming is largely presented in terms of guilt, depicting a "bad" humanity that has sinfully and selfishly destroyed the planet, but which can nevertheless come "good" and redeem itself by way of seizing such crises as opportunities for building heaven down on earth. The question that should be posed at this juncture thus concerns what it would mean to attempt to view the crisis of extinction outside of the moral discourse of fall and redemption. Concomitantly, what potential lays dormant in just such an amoral thinking? Perhaps, the means of

achieving such a perspective on the very real possibility of an end to terrestrial life is the pessimistic view that extinction, far from being some worst-case scenario, is in fact a necessary and inevitable condition for the possibility of the emergence of terrestrial life as such. This is effectively to say that, once understood as the catastrophe that had to happen, the bringing about of extinction becomes untethered from the guilty thinking of fall and redemption. While the view that humanity is fundamentally fallen is indeed pessimistic, it is a thinking that nevertheless holds onto the possibility of an incredible reversal of fortune; the manifestation of an absolute good in the form of humanity's ability to redeem itself through large-scale behaviour modification. Therefore, against such an optimistic view—albeit one which appears tinged with a certain sadomasochism—an equally pessimistic and liberating view would be that humanity couldn't be fallen if there is no hope for redemption, or that we need not think through extinction in terms of the guilt associated with having sinned against nature, if extinction is itself both inevitable and necessary for thinking as such. But why might there be no hope, and what presents itself to us as an opportunity to say "perhaps" to extinction?

The real possibility of extinction weighs heavily on a contemporary conscience plagued by the guilty feeling that if only we had done something, or if only we had restrained ourselves, then the ecological crisis that we face today would never have reared its hideous countenance. Against such feelings of guilt there is another view on extinction, a perhaps more pessimistic view, that holds it to be an inevitability for a finite universe. As the contemporary philosopher Ray Brassier argues in his text *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*,

> sooner or later both life and mind will have to reckon with the disintegration of the ultimate horizon, when, roughly one trillion, trillion, trillion (10^{1728}) years from now, the accelerating expansion of the universe will have disintegrated the fabric of matter itself […] Every star in the universe will have burnt out, plunging the cosmos into a state of absolute darkness and leaving behind nothing but spent husks of collapsed matter. All free matter, whether on planetary surfaces or in interstellar space, will have decayed, eradicating any remnants of life based in protons and chemistry, and erasing every vestige of sentience—irrespective of its physical basis. Finally, in a state cosmologists call "asymptopia," the stellar corpses littering the empty universe will evaporate into a brief hailstorm of elementary particles. Atoms themselves will cease to exist. Only the implacable gravitational expansion will continue, driven by the currently inexplicable force called "dark energy," which will keep pushing the extinguished universe deeper and deeper into eternal and unfathomable blackness. (228)

On Brassier's account, which seems to be the conventional cosmological understanding of the fate of the physical universe, the extinction of terrestrial life, rather than being a tragic consequence that could be avoided through some moment of redemption of life, is instead an inevitability—something that simply awaits life as a result of the universe's finitude. Therefore, regardless of thought's "physical basis"— whether we find a means of installing thought into silicon-based forms of "life," or some other support that does not suffer from the frailties of the human body—it would seem that Brassier's account suggests, by the very structure of the physical universe, the extinction of all life is simply inevitable. While we may question both the cosmological and ontological validity of such an account, it nevertheless presents us with a unique and interesting speculative opportunity. Indeed, if it is in such a finite universe that thought has originated as such, then the extinction of life and of thought would appear to be a necessary condition for thought as such. This is to say that, if the universe tends inexorably towards conditions that are inhospitable for life and thought, then the support that thought and life find in such a finite universe binds such phenomena to extinction. It is for this reason that Brassier, following Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of solar catastrophe in his text *The Inhuman*, writes that, when understood as conditioned by a universe tending towards the impossibility of life, "*everything is dead already*" (ibid, 223).

The response to such a cosmological fact need not be one of resignation or a sense of cool detachment in the face of solar catastrophe. Instead, the affirmation of the possibility that we exist within a fundamentally finite universe might simply act to disrupt the moralistic discourse through which we conventionally make sense of global warming and similar ecological crises. This is to say that, if, ultimately, all life—whether it were human or non-human—tends towards the inescapable destiny of extinction, then it is not a question of simply finding a way to accept, in a spirit of resignation, the negative effect of human beings on our environment and on the other beings we come into contact with, but, instead, to reject the moralistic discourse that begins with the supposedly brute fact of our human wickedness, selfishness, and stupidity, and then—in a manner not unlike the Freudian *Fort-Da* game, as Colebrook notes—looks towards affirming the possibility of salvation—whether it comes in the form of certain religious attachments, a faith in the ethical impact of "living green," or an unwavering certitude in reason's capacity to transform crisis into opportunity. The

task, therefore, is not one of simply accepting extinction, but of instead posing the question: "if some form of extinction is ultimately inevitable, what kind of extinction do we want?" Of course, such a question must be taken as being, in a certain sense, a rhetorical assertion and not as an appeal to the need for a kind of liberal assertion of our individual predilections for particular extinction narratives, nor as an appeal to some kind of collectivization organized around the question of the fate of terrestrial life. However, to assert that this question is rhetorical is not to insist that it can therefore have no impact on "non-rhetorical real world issues." It is to suggest instead that the very moral discourse we typically work with when discussing the issues surrounding global warming may itself be rhetorical and unachievable—there cannot be any metaphysical salvation in a physically finite universe—and can therefore be disrupted by such an aforementioned rhetoric of extinction. To pose the question of the inevitability of extinction is to assert the rhetorical power of a physical fact, insofar as the pessimistic notion that all life ultimately tends towards not simply death but extinction—of a death that cannot and will not be remembered—is to suggest that there could be other ways of thinking through terrestrial crisis than through a moral discourse of fall and redemption.

It is interesting to note the optimism with which both global warming activists and deniers affirm the present. For the climate change activist, there is a need to act now so as to safeguard the future from the violence and devastation of global warming. For the global warming denier or skeptic, there is no need to act now because the future as can be foreseen is already stable and safeguarded. However, what neither of these positions lends themselves to is the affirmation of an unknowable future that is ultimately finite. The possible finitude of the universe and the potential inevitability of extinction could be taken as an opportunity to sever our attachments to certain "necessary" notions about human nature and about the future, and as the chance to open us up, by contrast, to the possibility of a plurality of perspectives and ideas about ourselves, the heterogeneity of (human) life, and the ever-changing and dynamic world in which we live.

None of this is to say that the phenomena of failure or extinction must be approached as rivals to more positive phenomena, such as optimism or hope. Instead, the question being raised here is one of the unforeseen potential that conventionally pejorative modes of comportment could perhaps have in providing us a space to

critically evaluate the dominant discourses that surround significant contemporary issues such as mass unemployment and global warming. However, in order for this critical potential to have any chance of eventuating we must learn to say "perhaps" to such phenomena, and attempt to create a space for understanding them anew.

Conclusion

The case studies that comprise the final three chapters of this thesis have shown the capacity for quotidian and "uninspiring" phenomena to serve as a means for thinking through the possibility of resistance once such phenomena have been affirmed via the disposition of "perhaps" (see chapter two). While a dominant "image of resistance" (see chapter three) inhibits the thinking of the quotidian as potentially resistant or counter-hegemonic, insofar as it privileges rare and distinguished phenomena that are typically associated with notions of the extraordinary or heroic, we have shown that the seemingly ordinary and undignified phenomena of everyday life under late capitalism such as excess, laziness, and pessimism, can be approached as potential allies in the attempt to think through possibilities for resistance. Indeed, our cultural imaginary is populated by fantasies of a different contemporary humanity, one more in line with a certain image of resistance, and one that is accordingly capable of being more balanced and measured in its comportment, more militant and active in its struggles, and more optimistic in the face of defeat or failure. While both Badiou's and Žižek's works are too rich and complex to be subsumed under such a conventional image of resistance there is nevertheless a sense in which their work, insofar as it privileges an ethos of greatness and heroism, contributes to a disregard for certain contemporary phenomena in terms of their being simply too ubiquitous to count as worthy forms of resistance. Indeed, and as Halberstam has argued, while Žižek, like Halberstam, "tackles the subject of failure" in works such as *In Defense of Lost Causes*, such an affirmation of failure appears to be admissible only to the extent that it can signal future triumph (*The Queer Art of Failure*, 174). Halberstam argues further that such a response to failure seems to be wedded to Žižek's elitist tendencies, writing that:

> as in his other books, he pillories postmodernism, queers, and feminism, ignores critical ethnic studies altogether, and uses popular culture with high theory not to unravel difficult arguments or to practice nonelite pedagogy but only to keep insisting that we are all dupes of culture, misreaders of history, and brainwashed by contemporary politics. Žižek does not defend lost causes; he just keeps trying to resurrect a model of political insurgency that depends

upon the wisdom, the intellectual virtuosity, and the radical insight of, well, people like him. (ibid, 174)

While we would resist the temptation to cast aside Žižek's works as simply or purely elitist, and have, instead, argued that his work can be read in a more pluralistic vein—that is to say, with a spirit of "perhaps" (see chapter one)—Halberstam nevertheless raises an important point regarding the limited manner in which major philosophical figures like Žižek can affirm quotidian and everyday phenomena such as failure. While the work of Badiou and Žižek is certainly irreducible to such a popular sense of the purported inadequacies of contemporary political subjects—the notion that the late capitalist "everyday," and the subject of this situation is simply complicit with hegemony—there is nevertheless a sense in which their works engender a dismissive attitude to phenomena that are deeply entwined with the "complicit" and "non-resistant" everyday. It is in this sense that we can see a link between the work of these eminent contemporary philosophers and the conventional "image of resistance" that functions to promote the search for resistance in the distinguished, great, and heroic. Indeed, in showing the potential that can be uncovered in even the most quotidian of phenomena, the disposition of "perhaps" that this thesis affirms shows the continued significance of postmodern philosophy, insofar as the latter affirms plurality over both authority and hierarchy.

Badiou and Žižek are certainly not the first critics of postmodern philosophy. Indeed, postmodernism, while often thought of as a fashionable strain of thinking that dominates the contemporary intellectual landscape, appears to have been perennially under attack, accused of rejecting reality in favour of "signifier play" and endless textual exegesis, rejecting rigorous scholarship in favour of sophism, and of rejecting politics in favour of aesthetics. However, Badiou and Žižek are far removed from what could be called the typical critique of postmodern thought. As we saw in chapter one, there is a great deal that unites both these figures with those intellectuals conventionally associated with postmodern philosophy. Like Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Deleuze, both Badiou and Žižek reject the existence of normative rules for politics, ethics, and aesthetics; and, like these aforementioned "postmoderns," they both reject scientism and affirm a plurality of spaces in which thought can thrive. The existence of such sympathies, as exist between Badiou and Žižek and the postmodernists they position themselves against, thus raises the question of what is at stake in such a discussion of these two contemporary figures as a corrective to the

thought of those they succeeded. As we saw in chapter two, the real contention between Badiou and Žižek, on the one hand, and postmodern philosophy, on the other, appears to be over the particular ethos that philosophy can engender in its reader. This is to say that, rather than attacking postmodern thought due to its apparent lack of practical or "real world" utility, Badiou and Žižek instead approach their polemic against postmodern philosophy in terms of the latter's purported tendency to instill a certain ethos of indecisiveness and inaction. It is perhaps not surprising that this is the more substantial element of their dispute, since Heidegger, a figure whom Badiou declares to be the "last universally recognizable philosopher" (*Being and Event*, 1) and whom Žižek—like most contemporary philosophers—has studied deeply, argued that the "*powerlessness of* [philosophical] *thinking* seems to be obvious" since, in terms of bringing the thinker towards "immediate effectiveness and achievement," philosophical thought surely cannot compete with the technologically mediated power of the natural and social sciences (*Contributions to Philosophy*, 38). No doubt, many political scientists and economists would agree that the most philosophy can hope to achieve is clarification of certain conceptual concerns, offering little else beyond a kind of personal reflection and self-improvement that can provide no basis for policy formation or direct political intervention. However, Heidegger complicates this assessment when he states that the designation of philosophy as powerless results from the modern association of power and material change, an association that has "led to a disdaining of every proceeding and path that do not, with their very first step, produce 'results' with which we can 'make' and 'experience' something" (ibid, 39). In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, based on the lecture series that he delivered around the time of writing *Contributions to Philosophy*, Heidegger reiterates this sense of the impracticality of philosophy; however, in doing so he also gestures towards another means of thinking through the question of the "power" of philosophical thought. He states that

> it is entirely correct and completely in order to say, "You can't do anything with philosophy." The only mistake is to believe that with this, the judgment concerning philosophy is at an end. For a little epilogue arises in the form of a counter-question: even if *we* can't do anything with it, may not philosophy in the end do something *with us*, provided that we engage ourselves with it? (13)

Here Heidegger switches the emphasis from the possible uses of philosophical thought—or its "applications" in or on an existent world—to the question of what we could call the effect of philosophy on those that encounter it. That is to say, Heidegger

redefines the question of the "worth" of philosophy by attending not to philosophy's (absent) instrumental power but to its "affective" power on the one who would think or act. Against understanding the reader as a fully formed and self-identical subject who simply uses philosophy as a tool, Heidegger gestures towards a thinking of philosophy as a means of radically disrupting and transforming the reader so as to open them up to alternative modes of comportment that may have otherwise been inaccessible. Such a conception of philosophy as a discourse that acts on the reader, as opposed to being simply a body of knowledge for the reader to use so as to achieve their goals, allows us to consider alternatives to the delimiting of borders between "useful" knowledge and "useless" philosophical investigation. Accordingly, while Heidegger did not himself speak directly to the question of philosophy's relation to concrete political practice—and has often been accused of maintaining a certain apolitical stance—his reorientation of the question of the relationship between these two domains is echoed through much contemporary thought on the matter. For example, in an interview with Peter Gratton, Jean-Luc Nancy responds to the question of what philosophy can do for social workers or political actors by invoking a similar line of thinking to Heidegger, stating that "philosophy does not provide tools; it remains incapable of acting in the proper sense, but it acts upon the agents of action, it provides the momentum, the push…" ("The Commerce of Plural Thinking," 238-9).

If, then, philosophy has a greater capacity to act on the reader or student than it has to act as a tool that the reader or student can use to impact the world "directly," the question that must be asked regards what kind of impact, "momentum," or "push" the philosophical work gestures towards. In a sense it is this question that has underpinned much of this body of research's engagement with the contemporary advocacy for a decisiveness and divisiveness in thought. As we saw in the first two chapters, for Badiou and Žižek it seems that contemporary philosophy's proper impact or "push" is one connected to an affirmation of heroism, greatness, and danger. Indeed, as Badiou puts it himself towards the conclusion to *Logic of Worlds: Being and Event II*:

> I am sometimes told that I see in philosophy only a means to reestablish, against the contemporary apologia of the futile and the everyday, the rights of heroism. Why not? Having said that, ancient heroism claimed to justify life through sacrifice. My wish is to make heroism exist through the affirmative joy which is universally generated by following consequences through. We

could say that the epic heroism of the one who gives his life is supplanted by the mathematical heroism of the one who creates life, point by point. (514)

A much more detailed account of the question of heroism, as it features for Badiou, is outlined in his short text *Philosophy for Militants*—a work with a much less provocative original title: *La relation énigmatique entre philosophie et politique*—in which he attempts to think through the possibility of a contemporary figure of heroism. On Badiou's account, heroism refers to the possibility for the human animal to move "beyond the natural limits" that are prescribed by the situation (32). Badiou argues that the human animal gains its humanity proper in such possible heroism, and that, furthermore, it is a necessary contemporary task to create a new "symbolic representation of this humanity that exists beyond itself" (ibid, 32). Badiou argues that there have been two previous symbolic forms of heroism, the "warrior" and the "soldier," both of which found their expression in the greatest poetic works of their time: epic poetry and romantic poetry (ibid, 34). The "warrior," Badiou claims, is an individual and aristocratic figure beholden to the swaying fate of the gods, while the "soldier" is a democratic figure that speaks to the anonymous power of the masses in modernity (ibid, 35-43). While both of these figures have functioned as symbols for the human animal to "create something beyond [its] own limits, and thus to participate in the creation of a few eternal truths" the question remains for Badiou as to the possible arrival of a new and contemporary figure of heroism (ibid, 43). Presumably, the acquisition of such a new figure in the affirmation of heroism can only be found by listening to the great poetic works of the modern day and to locate the emergence of something new in them.

Consciously or not, such a location of the heroic figure in the artworks of the contemporary world occurs towards the end of Žižek's *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. In this work, Žižek speculates on what would constitute the "authentic revolutionary," and decides upon a fusion of various anti-heroes from popular American television programs. (125). He states that,

> in 1929, when a journalist asked Stalin what characterized a good Bolshevik, his answer was a combination of Russian dedication and American pragmatist spirit. Today, eighty years later, one should add to the list innocent joy: what we need is a subject who combines the dedication of Jack Bauer [*24*], the inventive pragmatic spirit of Stringer Bell [*The Wire*], and the innocently malicious joy of Homer Simpson [*The Simpsons*]. (ibid, 125)

There is seemingly much overlap between Žižek's discussion of the contemporary heroic figure and Badiou's claims about heroism from *Logic of Worlds*. As we have discussed in chapter one, Badiou's and Žižek's respective affirmations of the divisive and the great, while often minimizing the political possibilities of the everyday, do not preclude their work from being read in the spirit of pluralism. Nevertheless, any reading of their work that attempts to emphasize their pluralism inevitably comes up against the specific kind of encouragement ("the momentum, the push") that their work provides.

Hallward provides us with an interesting means of thinking through the momentum provided by Badiou's work, especially his work on ethics, when he writes that, "understood in terms of [Badiou's] philosophy of truth, 'ethical' should simply describe what helps to preserve or en-*courage* a subjective fidelity as such" ("Translator's Introduction," xi). Indeed, here Hallward makes no exaggeration, insofar as, for Badiou, the kind of question that must be posed by philosophy in the name of ethics is not that of "how must one live?" or "what is the right course of action?" but instead "in what way, and for what reason do subjects lose their fidelity to an event of truth?" For Badiou, it is a mistake for philosophy to focus on what he refers to as an "ethics of communication" or an ethics of "opinion"—i.e., to think about the ethical questions that are raised within the situation, aside from the event of truth and its subjective pursuit (*Ethics*, 50-2). Badiou seems to feel justified in this decision, in privileging the question of the subject's fidelity to the event—and its possible infidelity—over what we could call the everyday of the "situation," because he sees the emergence of the event of truth as offering the possibility for the "human animal" to become "immortal" (ibid, 12). As Christopher Watkin has explained, Badiou's discussion of the event of truth as presenting the possibility for immortality is not "a denial of biological death," and nor is it a rehabilitation of a religious conception of the possibility of life after death in an immaterial world (*Difficult Atheism*, 72). Instead, Watkin describes Badiou's approach to immortality as being closer to "a prize won in [death's] teeth" than any kind of life after death (ibid, 72). The immortality that is made possible by the event of truth is then closer to the immortality that is offered by having taken part in something momentous, something that will live on to inspire further great events. No doubt unwittingly, Badiou's

discussion of heroism and the possibility of immortality echoes David Bowie's lyrics from his 1977 hit "Heroes":

> Though nothing will keep us together
> we could steal time,
> just for one day
> we can be heroes, forever and ever
> what d'you say?

As Bowie's song suggests, while the event may only be a fleeting moment—something that occurs one day and is then gone the next—the truth that the subject holds a fidelity to presents the possibility of opening up another order of time, a time irreducible to the everyday situation, which, through subjective fidelity, grants the possibility of a heroic immortality beyond finitude, "forever and ever." It is this sense, in Badiou's work, of an evental rupture that grants another order of time that causes Critchley to suspect that Badiou is seduced by the order of "great politics, the event that would, in Nietzsche's words, break history in two" ("On the Ethics of Alain Badiou," 234). Such a seduction is, for Critchley, dangerous insofar as "to be seduced by great politics is to risk nostalgically blinding oneself to the struggles of the present" and, as such, this "seduction risks being politically disempowering" (ibid, 234). Critchley continues, posing the possibility that

> perhaps the epoch of great politics, like the epoch of great art for Heidegger and Hegel, is over. Perhaps. And perhaps that is a good thing. Perhaps we have had enough of the virile, Promethean politics of the will, the empty longing for total revolution. (ibid, 234)

It is the possibilities that cannot be grasped at the level of the great, heroic, or divisive, which are potentially obscured by the philosophical privileging of rarified moments and forms. As we have shown over the last three chapters of this body of research, there are many possibilities to be found in those problematic phenomena that cannot be easily reconciled with the philosophical conditions that Badiou engages with. As we have shown across chapters four, five, and six, there is a host of everyday phenomena such as contemporary forms of dance, walking, tagging, and failure that can function as a rich source for philosophical thought if we are able to avoid the seduction of the promises of greatness and heroism. Indeed, while it is difficult to conceive of these quotidian phenomena as being caught up with something of the order of Badiou's "event" or Žižek's "act," the possibility of the event does not have to be approached in terms of a logic of decisiveness and heroism. In other words,

learning to say "perhaps" to the phenomenality of the ubiquitous and the everyday also involves learning to say "perhaps" to the event itself. For Badiou, the beginning of philosophy must be that of a "choice of axioms," an initial groundless decision that necessitates an acceptance of "all the consequences of our first choice" (*Philosophy for Militants*, 25). *Contra* such a sense of decision, radically breaking with the conventions of *doxa* and making a philosophical leap of faith for which we must ultimately be responsible, we can instead say "perhaps" to an event that is to come—an event that cannot be simply designated as absolutely external to the mundane, everyday, and quotidian phenomena of late capitalism.

The underlying logic of perhaps, the logic that would underpin the attempt to say "perhaps" to the event, is expressed nicely in Michael Sayeau's text *Against the Event*: *The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative*, where he draws out the undecidability of the everyday's possible connection to something like Badiou's sense of "event" (1-2; 20-22). Sayeau does this through his reading of a scene from the Spike Jonze film *Adaptation*. In the scene discussed, the film's protagonist—a fictionalized version of the film's actual writer, Charlie Kaufman—attends a screen-writing workshop in order to get help adapting a work for the screen—a process that has thus far only lead to failure and frustration. Towards the end of the workshop the protagonist is able to ask a question of the main lecturer and, for Sayeau, both the protagonist's question and the lecturer's response tell us something crucial about the everyday:

KAUFMAN   Sir, what if a writer is attempting to create a story where nothing much happens, where people don't change, they don't have any epiphanies. They struggle and are frustrated and nothing is resolved. More a reflection of the real world—

MCKEE   The real world?

KAUFMAN   Yes, Sir.

MCKEE   The real fucking world? First of all, if you write a screenplay without conflict or crisis, you'll bore your audience to tears. Secondly: Nothing happens in the world? Are you out of your fucking mind? People are murdered every day! There's genocide, war, corruption! Every fucking day somewhere in the world somebody sacrifices his life to save somebody else! Every fucking day someone somewhere takes a conscious decision to destroy someone else! People find love! People lose it, for Christ's sake! A child watches her mother beaten to death on the steps of a church! Someone goes hungry! Somebody else betrays his best friend for a woman! If you can't find that stuff in life,

> then you, my friend, don't know crap about life! And why the fuck are you wasting my two precious hours with your movie? I don't have any use for it! I don't have any bloody use for it!

KAUFMAN   Okay, thanks

Sayeau argues that what is interesting about this exchange is the extent to which both Kaufman, arguing for the relative emptiness and banality of an everyday without epiphanies, and McKee, arguing for the reality of an everyday existence that is punctured by radical shifts, changes, and disruptions, seem to reveal something fundamental about the everyday (ibid, 2). What such an exchange seems to reveal is a certain undecidability regarding the everyday, insofar as the modern sense of time "is somehow characterized by incessant change and dramatic developments *and* a listless uneventfulness at one and the same time" (ibid, 2-3). While Sayeau is mostly concerned with drawing out this undecidability with regards to its repercussions for reading modernist literature, such a discussion of the problematic relationship between the everyday is extremely useful for our purposes insofar it helps us to understand the distinction between the disposition of "perhaps" and the logic of decision or decisiveness. Given that the everyday seems to be without the kind of epiphanies that Badiou and Žižek would associate with the revelation of the "event" or "act" *and* consistently punctured by radical moments of rupture and dramatic change we can avoid the false choice between affirming either fidelity or undecidability, and instead say "perhaps" to both. In doing so, we can acknowledge that the pressure to decide and the imperative to remain faithful to the undecidability of phenomena are each significant and to some extent unavoidable. Rather than extolling the need for a decision that affirms the existence of the event against the situation—for the moment of fidelity to a chosen axiom and the subsequent responsibility for such a choice—or precluding the event all together, we can attempt to say "perhaps" to the event and to the event's undecidability, to maintain the tension between what is everyday, and seemingly complicit with hegemony, and what is extraordinary and therefore seemingly counter-hegemonic.

To return to the question of the affect that philosophy provides its reader we could then oppose the Badiouian affirmation of philosophy, as a means to "*en-courage*," to the logic of "perhaps" that we have drawn from Caputo, which opens the possibility of philosophy providing a means to "*en*-courage." The "en" prefix can have a variety of meanings in English, but we can find the sense of "to put into," as in

the sense of to "entice," or to "surround with," as in the sense of to "encompass." To emphasize "en" as opposed to "courage" is to suggest that philosophy can instill an openness to what we are surrounded with—the seemingly banal and ubiquitous as much as the seemingly extraordinary and great—and an openness to what we might be able to put into things or to find in things once we are open to their being other than they initially or conventionally appear.

However, it must be stressed that such critiques of philosophical heroism, and its accompanying logic of greatness and distinction, are not intended as critiques of Badiou's and Žižek's work *tout court*. Instead, and as was shown in chapter one, both of these figures can be seen to affirm, perhaps against themselves, a pluralistic approach to both philosophy and politics. Badiou and Žižek are both exciting and rigorous contemporary theoreticians, with both producing extremely rich works that can support a host of divergent readings. That being said, in order for such divergent readings to be received as collectively *en*-couraging, rather than as competitively en-*couraging*, it helps to read their work in the spirit of "perhaps," to approach their work other than as being merely a polemical and anti-postmodern "corrective" to other forms of contemporary continental thought—whether it be phenomenological, deconstructive, Marxist or otherwise. What is radical about the thought of Badiou and Žižek is perhaps not that they often attack the privileged terms of postmodern thought and replace them with re-conceptualizations of metaphysical terms such as "truth," "being," and "ontology," but, instead, something as yet unforeseen and perhaps even unforeseeable. Indeed, given that both thinkers encourage us to engage with such a wide variety of disciplines and modes of thought and action, why should we limit ourselves to championing these figures on the grounds that they breath fresh life into established terms? In other words, once approached in terms of the openness of the spirit of "perhaps"—the very approach that both thinkers overtly critique—the possibilities that their work can offer become an open challenge for the reader who is caught up in that philosophical "push" to find alternatives or an otherwise where others find only the dominance of oppressive forms of thinking and living. Such a challenge is certainly a risky one, and one that must be taken up without guarantees or assurances. Yet, despite this, neither should such a challenge be presumed as one reserved for a solemn and serious figure of "heroism." Such a challenge does not have to be thought in terms of the violent upheavals that are associated with the radicality

of the "event" or "act," but can be approached instead in terms of Caputo's challenge to confront our mistrust and suspicion of "one little word": perhaps.

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