MEME-WORK: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE ALT-RIGHT

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I, Ivan Knapp, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
This thesis attempts to elaborate the psychic dynamics of the alt-right by reading certain of its visual objects, in particular memes, as well as artworks which touch on alt-right sensibilities, through psychoanalytic theories of dreams, the group and male hysteria. Presented as a series of case studies, it asks: What can the psychoanalytic vocabularies these theories provide surface of the ‘work’ these objects perform, participate in, or contest? ‘Work’, in this context, refers to the operations by which the representation of ideas encode psychic processes. Thus, the thesis considers how certain historical figurations of online sociality on the one hand, and novel modes of mediating subjecthood on the other, are legible to frameworks which address the pathological dimensions of everyday life. The thesis ends by calling for critical theory which makes use of the tools psychoanalysis offers to seriously re-engage with digital cultures and their discourses.

Beginning with a sketch of the shared characteristics of memes and the Freudian conception of dreams and dream-work, the thesis pursues this analogy through an analysis of a small sample of alt-right memes. It explores how a psychoanalytic understanding of dreams might help surface in memes a register of latent or hidden fantasies which are both individual and collective, personal and political. The thesis then turns to the way various popular and theoretical iterations of horizontality can be posed both to Juliet Mitchell’s work on a lateral axis in psychoanalysis, and to the alt-right’s claim to have appropriated certain historically situated avant-garde strategies. Finally, suggestions are offered as to how narcissism and the death drive might be apprehended in their social forms through the alt-right’s exploitation of memetic image infrastructures. Using the languages of psychoanalysis alongside those of art history, this research forwards theorizations of gender and the group that entangle new technological affordances and their digital ecologies.
This thesis represents the first sustained critical attempt to elaborate the psychic dynamics of the alt-right through its visual objects. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, my research attempts to both locate different registers of transmission at work in these digital items and to position alt-right aesthetics within a broader art historical context. In art historical scholarship memes have received scarce critical attention. Conversely, in the extant scholarship on memes and memetic forms of representation, predominantly issuing from studies of digital cultures, there are precious few analyses which mobilize psychoanalytic frameworks. Therefore this thesis does not so much fill a gap in the current literature on memes as open a space for further cross-disciplinary research in which psychoanalytic vocabularies are recognized as critical tools for apprehending the psychic dynamics encoded in novel modes of representation. In situating art history as a field through which psychoanalytic theory may be brought into dialogue with new technological forms, this thesis might embolden a reconsideration of the kind of disciplinary and methodological alliances we require to interrogate the shifting dimensionality of hybrid digital artefacts.

As I have experienced through writing this thesis, the questions it poses and the perspectives it takes are of interest to analysts and researchers outside of academic institutions, such as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and Data & Society, whose work focusses on the intersection of digital cultures and reactionary political movements. Through these organisations, the research questions guiding this thesis have the potential to filter into the journalism which shapes popular discourse around both memes and their exploitation by predominantly online far right political movements. Finally, it is also possible that this research may be of value to clinical psychoanalysts working with patients whose interpersonal relationships are primarily conducted online. In focussing my research on the way certain digital forms transmit unconscious communication, I suggest their availability as modes of speech which might deepen clinical insight into pathologies associated with, and mediated by, new technologies.
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Over three days at the beginning of July 2018 the British artist Ed Fornieles convened a live action role play entitled Cel. In the artist’s own words, the project:

Ran over 72 hours, simulating a set of hyper-aggressive patriarchal structures through means of 10 participants. Operating within a contained installation, the performance took the form of a radicalised alt-right gamer group that embarked on a program of self-betterment, undertaking a radical act of self-destruction as their ultimate revenge against the world […] Cel largely drew on the content of 4chan and reddit to create a complex social framework that foregrounded a particularly destructive brand of masculinity.\(^1\)

In these few sentences Fornieles sketches out several of the features by which we have become familiar with the alt-right: the alt-right is a problem of masculinity; the movement poses questions of the group related to specific sites of assembly and operation; alt-right violence is multifarious.

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\(^1\) Ed Fornieles, *Cel* [<http://www.carlosishikawa.com/exhibitions/cel/cel.pdf exhibition text>] [accessed 5 May 2020].
At one point in the role play a meme enters the ‘contained installation’. Clad in a white body suit (figure 1.2), the character is introduced to distribute unspoken messages to the participants. This intervention, we are encouraged to infer, has something to do with the therapeutic frame the artist supplies, the ‘program of self-betterment’ that obliges participants to engage in daily de-briefing sessions in which they discussed how the role play experience helped them explore hidden aspects of their identities. *Cel* was acted out in the safe space of a flat in London’s Soho but when the work made its debut at Carlos Ishikawa gallery later that summer, in its exhibition form as a video, events elsewhere had interposed. That first public screening of *Cel* took place on 20 of September, five days after Brentan Tarrant shot down one hundred worshippers – a slim majority of which, fifty-one, lost their lives – in the mosques of Christchurch, New Zealand. The implications of this event for the video, which contains its own massacre scene, discharged along the empty barrel of bright yellow toy gun, provided a brutal reminder of what such projects stake.

This thesis is an attempt to engage the alt-right using the theoretical frameworks, rather than therapeutic possibilities, psychoanalysis provides. Central to my argument is the conviction that certain visual objects, memes and website designs authored and distributed by the alt-right on the one hand and a selection of artworks on the other, offer materials for elaborating the psychic dynamics of the alt-right. Entailed in this approach is the wager that these forms manifest unconscious desires and anxieties which may be drawn out in dialogue with bodies of theory that specialize in the analysis of how sexuality and violence construct subjecthood. Despite the overabundance of material alt-right zones provide for evidencing psychopathological disclosures, attempts at locating, theorizing and contextualising an alt-right subjectivity within psychic frameworks have been threadbare. The reference that my title makes to Sigmund Freud’s work with dreams is explicit about the assistance his vocabulary provides

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for securing meaning from the transitory and fleeting images which abound in our current digital landscape. Yet psychoanalytic theories of the group, of hysteria and of narcissism also inform my selection of a small and eclectic combination of artworks which are introduced on the grounds that they either surface or approximate an alt-right subjectivity by other means or open to different dimensions in its formation. In so doing, art helps us zoom out from alt-right circles and the limits and logics of alt-right objects, securing perspectives, however provisional, by which these dynamics emerge through the forms which characterize our current mediatechnological moment. Thus, the research questions which guide what follows begin with asking: What analytic tools do we need to fully recognise the symptoms the alt-right present? How do certain psychical conflicts find expression in modes of representation common to, but not exclusively of, the alt-right? What are the implications of taking the alt-right meme as a resource for exploring the psychic resonances of digital ecologies and technological affordances?

Immanent to this project is the backdrop of a reactionary turn in the highest offices of state in Brazil, the United States, Hungary, Great Britain, Poland, Italy, China, India, the Philippines, and Russia to name but a few. In response to the pronounced gendering of these developments, I propose that the alt-right provide a locus for thinking about how masculinity becomes pathological in certain historical conjunctures. The history of fascism has long demonstrated that new technologies are entangled with, and give expression to, psychic dynamics. A central claim of my argument is that the meme, which might well be considered the paradigmatic aesthetic object of the alt-right, urgently requires interrogation on this score. Connecting the dispersed and anonymous legions of alt-rightists to corridors of executive power, the meme is not only a political device which may be waged under cover of a campaign but a vehicle, even a logic, of psychical transmission. As ‘meme’ is a term derived from evolutionary biology to speak about patterns of cultural development and exchange, my argument is merely that if memes play an active and productive role in the dissemination of conscious ideas then they must also carry the disguised investments of the
unconscious. Thus by ‘meme-work’ I mean something analogous to what Freud meant by dream-work, a set of operations by which a wish or anxiety is encoded into a scene; the ‘work’ here is a communicative operation, a means of transposing meaning that, through interpretation, becomes shared, becomes inter-subjective. For psychoanalysis, Freud’s discovery of displacement, condensation, and secondary revision unlocked latent or hidden meaning in the structure of the dream and the conflicts, hidden from consciousness, which give it shape.

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During the latter months of Donald J. Trump’s campaign for the presidency of the United States in 2016, the alt-right became a global news story. In response there has been a reluctance in some quarters to add to the kind of speculation a febrile media environment demands. This wholly justifiable position declines offering further oxygen to a project which has proved to be so adept at turning outrage and condemnation to its advantage. At the start, then, there is a responsibility to the stakes of alt-right politics that requires at a bare minimum not only a clear idea of what might be gained by writing about the alt-right but where such an intervention aims to strike.

As the contracted prefix makes clear, the term alt-right describes a rebranding of fascism as a subcultural even counter-cultural movement. It also suggests that the alt-right is a largely online phenomenon. But whilst the transparently strategic goal of alt-right memes may be to recast the cultural associations we conventionally attach to familiar reactionary political demands, the aesthetic vocabulary deployed to these ends still provides a useful place to start. As Anna Teixeira Pinto and Kerstin Stakemeier, two of the most persistent art critical voices on the alt-right, have argued, the movement coheres at the level of the aesthetic rather than

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3 Whilst any provisional date for the formation of the alt-right is contestable, the term itself was coined by Richard Spencer in 2008. Most commentators tend to date a group identity coming into shape between 2012 and 2015.
the political. In other words, the jumble of often contradictory agendas which find cover under the alt-right umbrella is an alliance of convenience grounded on a shared sensibility rather than a coherent prospectus of policies. Coining a term I have found productive, media theorist Florian Cramer calls this the ‘memetic alt-right’, pointing to the image board site 4chan as a primary zone of congregation and incubation. 4chan’s almost uniformly anonymous users have long been credited with popularising and weaponising the internet meme. By these accounts, the site has played a central role in two interlinked processes: first, providing the conditions of communication which fostered the meme as a medium and, second, binding into a group a coalition of men’s rights group, white nationalists, involuntary celibates or ‘incels’, accelerationists, anti-Semites, transhumanists, online gamer groups and paramilitary organisations. In her widely read primer, *Kill All Normies*, Angela Nagle makes the case that the alt-right’s success as a political force flows from its advanced cultural apprehension of new media tools. 6 For Nagle this distinguishes the alt-right

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4 ‘The rapid rise of the movement that became known as the alt-right was fueled by its aesthetics rather than by its politics’. An important passage for this thesis continues: ‘Despite ongoing attempts to forge alliances with the traditional Far Right, the alt-right remains intensely suprastructural. The contemporary art milieu proved particularly susceptible to this far-right creep because several of its conventions of plasticity and meaning-production devices – like irony, transgression, over-identification, affirmation, and pastiche – have, by virtue of their ambivalent nature, an undeniable use value for the alt-right’. Teixeira Pinto and Stakemeier, ‘A Brief Glossary of Social Sadism’, *Texte Zur Kunst*, 116 (2019), 68-126 (p. 92).

5 See Cramer’s online lecture at: <https://aihr.uva.nl/content/events/events/2018/04/florian-cramer.html?origin=WwlfvMXFR%2F2F25v%2B1ML%2FjsPA&cb>

as a vanguardist ‘neo-Gramscian’ project.⁷ Such a framing is not just historically and critically limited, it also plays into an alt-right narrative which elevates the claims the group makes as to its intellectual origins.⁸ In that story, prominent alt-right figures describe themselves as the inheritors of Punk, Dada and the Situationist derive. Presented with such thin evidence as the movement provides, these claims have scarcely troubled the scholarly literature on the alt-right. The most vocal art criticism has instead focussed on the implications of the alt-right’s aesthetic project for certain modes of contemporary art making in which irony, transgressive identifications and the celebration of accelerated capital play a prominent role. Such moves, in the words of Morgan Quaintance, signal a ‘right shift’ in contemporary art that precedes and exceeds the problem of the alt-right itself.⁹ Critiques by Quaintance, Stakemeier, Teixeira Pinto, Larne Abse Gogarty, Marina Vishmidt and others have centered on what art criticism and theory can contribute to a refusal of this tendency and foreground the interplay of the aesthetic registers of late capital and advanced technologies.¹⁰ Thus whilst I

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⁸ These would include the French Nouvelle Droit, the work of Carl Schmidt, Julius Evola and Oswald Spengler.

⁹ A good example of this is Hannah Black on the artists participating in the 9th Berlin Biennale, who operate in a ‘social field entirely dominated by value [and] the increasing mediation of social life by advanced technology,’ wherein the ‘total rule of the commodity form means that political struggle cannot oppose the commodity, but has to pass through it’. Black, ‘The 9th Berlin Biennale’, Artforum, 55/1 (Sep 2016), 350-352 (p. 351).

do not necessarily disagree with Quaintance’s argument, I do want to consider less polemical perspectives in which difficult questions about the ambivalences at play in certain modes of art making come into focus.

A core assertion of this thesis is that recovering hysteria as a pathology is crucial to comprehending the alt-right at the level of subjectivity. Further, that hysteria lets onto a theoretical framework without which the psychic dimensions of the alt-right remain siloed from our present social formations and, in particular, the imaginary of historical contemporary technological infrastructures. So whilst other scholarly vocabularies might be more customary to the analysis of digital cultures and their items, I propose that a return to the foundational diagnosis of psychoanalysis is crucial if we are to recognise the symptoms the alt-right so theatrically perform.\textsuperscript{11} The great achievement of \textit{The Interpretation of Dreams} was not merely the discovery of a meaning in dreams and an apparatus for its uncovering, but that the conflicts which dream-work reveal correspond to the psychic conflict at the base of hysteria. I will return to the particular theoretical sources available for thinking memes and modes of online sociality through hysteria momentarily. For now it is important to emphasise that despite critical theory’s turn to psychoanalysis in the later 1970s and 1980s in Europe and the United States, since at least the turn of the century art history which uses the tools of psychoanalysis has declined to seriously deploy them in analyses of new technological forms in art.\textsuperscript{12} This is not at all to make the\footnotemark

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\footnotetext{11}{Following Freud’s ‘Report from Paris’ of 1886, the first paper of \textit{The Standard Edition}, it was suggested he should present a case of male hysteric which he duly gave to the College of Professors of the Faculty of Medicine in Vienna later that year. Freud, ‘Report from Paris’, 1886, in \textit{SE}, vol. i, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1966), pp. 3-15; and ‘Observation of a Severe Case of Hemi-Anaesthesia in a Hysterical Male’, 1886, in the same, pp. 23-34.}

\footnotetext{12}{Whilst the most notable examples of psychoanalytic perspectives being taken on digital cultures, including in the work of Sherry Turkle, Jerry Aline Flieger and Slavoj Žižek, can hardly claim to be art historical, Silvia Kolbowski (whose recent video, \textit{That Monster}, is discussed at the end of this thesis) remains a rare critical voice on how we might grasp our moments entanglements with the digital through a psychoanalytic lens. See Turkle, \textit{The...}}
preposterous claim that art and theory informed by psychoanalysis has not
been historically fiercely interested in the affordances of new media. But it
is to suggest that psychoanalytic art history has, largely speaking, declined
to engage internet-based practices and digital cultures as robustly as it
might.

At this point it will be important to provide a more substantive sense of the
specific objects this thesis is concerned with. In addition to memes, I rely on
certain works produced in the field of contemporary art to enrich, synthesize
and expand how we might conceive the field of alt-right aesthetics. Indeed
in the case of the first of these works I discuss, the Canadian artist Jon
Rafman’s 2013 video Still Life (Betamale), organises and synthesizes
disparate and obscure visual material into a tableau that provides a sense of
what alt-right visual culture actually looks like, its preferences and its
peculiarities. But if this is a convenience for my purposes it is also a
necessity, for such is the sheer scale of this material, the anonymity of its
creation and the instability of its status, producing a rubric for selection is
nigh impossible. (For the few memes I discuss in Chapter 1, my criteria has
been guided by the exemplary ways in which they express certain crucial
dynamics coupled with their virality or memetic diffusion). In any case,
with certain exceptions (as I discuss in Chapter 3), ascertaining any singular
style or idiom which encompasses the range of alt-right aesthetic production
is a thankless task. At best, one might find a posture, a sensibility which
comes into focus through the worldviews inscribed in the images
themselves.

In certain works, including both Still Life and Cel, the artist poses as a
member of the alt-right. BREITBART.RED, a 2018 work by Ubermorgen
which I discuss in Chapter 3 and is presented by the artists as ‘art for the
right’, shares this strategy. Yet, like Martine Neddam’s twenty-four years

Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984); Flieger,
Is Oedipus Online? Siting Freud after Freud (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); and
Žižek, ‘What can Psychoanalysis Tell us About Cyberspace?’, The Psychoanalytic Review,
91 (2004), 801-830.
old project mouchette.org, which I discuss at length in Chapter 2, BREITBART.RED is drawn from the historical category of net.art which, blossoming in the 1990s, precedes the post-internet designation of the younger generation of artists to which Rafman and Fornieles belong and whose work is most often cited as evidence of Quaintance’s ‘right shift’. Whilst artists of both generations address the subject under the conditions of shifting digital horizons whose liberatory or regressive implications they are compelled to negotiate, my purpose in putting these works into conversation is to suggest that if there is indeed a reactionary turn in art practices embedded in new technologies then the situation demands a farther sighted historical perspective. One of the curiosities this thesis explores is that contrary to the explicitly emancipatory and apparently progressive political implications of Web technologies as they first appeared, so many of the alt-right’s aesthetic tropes – anonymity, hacktivist intervention, low-tech, leaderless assembly, transgressive postures – recall the stylistic preferences of net.art. From this viewpoint both projects, the alt-right and net.art, come into focus as crucial experiments into the political and psychic entails of being social online.

This claim amounts to about the limit of this thesis’ historiography. Which is not to say it is the limit of my interest in how the alt-right interacts between past and present, nor which particular pasts it might recall. In Chapter 2 I turn toward dissident surrealism and the projection of male hysteria, whilst in Chapter 3 Mary Kelly’s Gloria Patri provides an example of how projects addressed to the conjuncture of masculinity, violence and media spectacle have used psychoanalysis to locate pathologies which spill over discrete historical contexts. My hope is that, taken together, these works offer the reader the insight they have provided me on the different ways we can think the alt-right psychoanalytically. For if my interest in memes is on account of what work they do, my interest in these artworks is to do with how they might inflect the traces of that work. By this I mean the way they render those same dynamics we perceive in the alt-right in their ulterior aspects: for example, in connecting the pathologies we find in our
moment to disparate histories and the critiques they have prompted, or by
opening to social forms which exceed the limit of alt-right aesthetics.

Consider the image of a cartoon frog superimposed onto a silhouette of the
President smirking behind a podium, or a formula turning the signifying
field of cuckoldry into an invective for insufficiently conservative
lawmakers. In these two memes, both of which are discussed in Chapter 1,
the determination of subjectivity by sexuality and violence as well as the
play of displacement and condensation, projection and identification, are at
the surface. But what latent, as oppose to surface, fantasies are these
operations at work on? And how do these processes relate to the
composition as well as the transmission of the meme’s contents? To what
extent do the affordances of the digital infrastructures which create and
distribute these items effect the psychic work they perform? The need for a
vocabulary which can distil such questions within a theoretical apparatus is
clear. For what psychoanalysis provides by the frameworks I will mobilize
are models for apprehending not so much the absurdity of alt-right images,
claims or demands, but rather their coherence with pathological conflicts.13

One of these memes, Pepe-Trump, is an image, almost always. The other is
a word which calls up images. Attendance to the rhetorical power of both
word and image within complex modes of distribution and exchange is a
convention of art history, which has developed and advanced a set of tools
for the purpose which be deployed to enrich the vocabularies of dream-
work. Thus I maintain that without an analysis attuned to the visual and the
various ways in which images operate en masse, access to the meme’s latent
contents will remain blocked. Holding memes apart from the record of art
historical critique risks devaluing the currency certain modes of
representation trade in. Often these values will be oblique or external to the
isolated example and unfamiliar to its author but remain imperative for the

13 As Mary Kelly recognised of a similar coalescence of hyperbolic masculine performance
and mediatised spectacle in the first Gulf War: ‘It’s nothing like the fascists of the 1930s
[...] it’s become a parody’. Mary Kelly and Margaret Iversen, ‘Mary Kelly in conversation
with Margaret Iversen’, in Mary Kelly, Imaging Desire (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,
work it performs. In the case of the alt-right the most burgeoning of these modes is the transgressive as a cultural form whose political possibilities and ascriptions have historically been contested. More recently the movement’s much publicised adoption of Icarian poses has problematised transgression anew.\textsuperscript{14} Hal Foster, in response to the proliferation of practices toying with taboo in the 1990s, memorably posed the problem as whether such invocations of the law were made ‘to ensure that it was still there’.\textsuperscript{15} Foster, whose work is an indispensable interlocutor throughout, cast his judgement acerbically; often they were made ‘at best in a neurotic plea for punishment, at worst in a paranoid demand for order’.\textsuperscript{16} Such problems, it seems, remain with us. They represent just one of the questions which the alt-right has presented to art history. I raise it here more to indicate the discursive landscape in which this thesis beats its path than to set the direction I will take. For whilst the psychic dynamics of the alt-right clearly bear on such problems, my aim is neither to reignite old arguments nor to resolve them. Instead, it is to pursue less travelled theoretical combinations in the hope they provide more expansive perspectives.

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In the late 1980s Klaus Theweleit published \textit{Male Fantasies}, his seminal two-volume study of the Freikorps which mobilised Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalytic theory to map the fantasmatic structures of proto-fascist


\textsuperscript{15} Foster, \textit{Return of the Real}, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 159. In regard to the way critiques of both far right tendencies in contemporary art and the strategic pastiche of alt-right provocateurs have problematised affirmatory and ironic modes, it is notable that Foster, in \textit{Bad New Days}, identifies the mimetic as the ‘avant-garde […] most relevant to our time’. Foster, \textit{Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency} (London: Verso, 2015), p. 83. I return to this theme in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{16} Foster, \textit{Return of the Real}, p. 159.
subjectivity. Working from various items of visual culture and first-hand accounts, Theweleit identified a metaphorical register in which masculinity and fascism were intertwined. The fascist imagination *Male Fantasies* presents associates its ideal masculinity with the imagery of the machine whose security is threatened by dissolute and formless substances such as mud, water, lava, shit, and blood. The geometry of these oppositions not only rests on Oedipal structures and an emphasis on the abject mother, but on a conception of the machine as carapace, as an approximation of armour, as, first, an object which could or should encase things. In this one immediately recognises the contrast with the imaginative associations of today’s ‘tech’ in its broadest sense. The strong figurations of our moment’s digital horizons call to mind words like the cloud, the swarm, the stack. To one degree or another such terms riff off the paradigm of the network – that which joins or connects. Contemporary technologies do not associate or aspire to enclosing but to diffusion and in so doing they resist visibility.\(^{17}\)

Inasmuch as the terms we use to think our new technologies relate to the network they also belong to a idea of horizontality which still clings to certain democratic ascriptions. (Note that in *Cel* Fornieles intimates that it is hierarchies which produce the alt-right’s masculinist politics of violence). The peak of these optimistic investments in horizontality came in the 1990s when, with the widespread availability of the World Wide Web, such hopes were perhaps most plausibly entertained. But the network, as the preeminent iteration of horizontality, persists in dominating the imaginary forms we give to social relations.\(^{18}\) Whilst there has been a trend, accelerated by the

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\(^{17}\) One might think of this shift in the technological imaginary as turning from the modernist machine object to the postmodern technological system, or as Katherine N. Hayles argued, the movement of computation ‘out of the box and into the environment’. Hayles, ‘Intermediation: The Pursuit of a Vision’, *New Literary History*, 38 (2007), 99-125 (p. 102). For an instructive reflection on a more recent turn, see Timon Beyes and Claus Pias, ‘The Media Arcane’, *Grey Room*, 75 (2019), 84-107.

events of and since 2016, toward the overdue uncoupling of ‘democratic’ from ‘horizontal’ we might recognise that the alt-right’s most prominent organisational features correspond firmly to its precepts – the movement is leaderless, anonymous and loosely networked. Indeed, this is precisely the score on which the alt-right is distinguished from earlier extreme right groups.19

The major historical attempts to distil the subjectivity of fascist groups, including those by Theweleit and Theodore Adorno, have cleaved to the outline of Freud’s texts in which the metapsychology of the ego and the super ego is mapped onto a libidinal identification with a leader.20 So if Freud’s work on dreams provides a language by which we might apprehend the psychic work of memes, there is an opportunity here to claim that we still need a set of theoretical terms which can speak to lateral relations and the abstractions we use to figure them. For if fascism has rightly been characterised as the political organisation most receptive to certain sexual perversions, how might the relation between the perverse and the normative

19 As Markus Miessen and Zoë Ritts write of the ‘spatial politics of right-wing populism’: ‘the spatially imagined, the virtually performed, the designed and the physically built [are each] facilitating the unprecedented development of right-wing political energies’. Miessen and Ritts, ‘Introduction’, in Para-Platforms: On the Spatial Politics of Right-Wing Populism, ed. by Miessen and Ritts (Berlin: Sternberg, 2018), pp. 7-11 (p. 7). See also in that volume, Nagle, ‘The Leaderless Digital Counterrevolution’ (pp. 25-40). Nagle claims that this organisational aspect owes much to the affordances and sensibility of 4chan as the website which incubated the alt-right as well as the activist group Anonymous. Whilst one might argue that, subsequent to 2016, the alt-right has established more robust organising structures, founding media groups and think tanks, such moves are at odds with the subcultural energies of the memetic alt-right and have as yet largely proved less than successful.

relate to the organisation of sexuality from the point of view of a social rather than familial topology?\textsuperscript{21} In \textit{Totem and Taboo}, the 1913 text written in the shadow of mounting pan-continental militarism, Freud tells a tale about the primal horde.\textsuperscript{22} In this account, the social is born from a foundational act of parricide by a band of brothers locked together in the killing’s aftermath by guilt and shame. Yet, because the father has been murdered his power grows and it is from his image that the fantasies of the group naturalise hierarchical social formations.

The work of Juliet Mitchell from the late 1990s until the present tells a different story about the group, one which acknowledges the autonomy of a lateral axis. As the first substantial intervention in this direction \textit{Mad Men and Medusas} (2000) makes plain, the trajectory of her project departs from the figure of the male hysteric to which her postulation of a lateral axis, just like Freud’s vertical axis, owes its origin.\textsuperscript{23} Thus it is from the much seen, if rarely spoken of, hysteria in male subjects that Mitchell arrives at a radical revision of psychoanalytic theory. The framework that emerges from this lateral axis establishes the universality of hysteria and places the sibling relation at its centre, and indeed \textit{the} centre of group formation. The threat of displacement from one’s position in the family tetrad provides the traumatic complement to the castration complex. In addition to the prohibition on parricide and maternal incest, sibling sex and murder finds its own prohibition which performs the vital task of socialising the child into groups. It is important to emphasise that Mitchell’s lateral axis runs in complement to, and constant dialogue with, the Oedipal vertical it is always intersecting. But, it is the autonomy Mitchell’s theory invests in the horizontal as a psychoanalytic dimension that this project pushes off from,

\textsuperscript{21} In a discussion of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s \textit{Salò}, Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit observed how ‘modern fascism is the (belated) form of political organization most congenial to Sade’s theory of sexuality’. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, ‘Merde Alors’, repr. in Bersani, \textit{Receptive Bodies} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 1-19 (p. 5).
\textsuperscript{22} In posing Freud’s story in this context one is reminded of Marshall McLuhan’s prediction that the information age would return social life to the condition of the tribe.
in the way a psychoanalytic horizontal might speak to the horizontality of the network.

With Mitchell’s work on the lateral axis there is an opportunity for thinking from and through siblings to the way modes of online sociality impinge on the formation of subjectivity, to ask how the subject is made up through these spaces and the fantasies they privilege. Whilst this means thinking subjectivity and online spaces through an account of the subject unfamiliar to the discursive parameters of these media, it also allows us to interrogate the fantasmatc dimensions of online experience by way of a number of psychoanalytic texts which, in English translation at least, have yet to be read through digital cultures. These include the work of several prominent post-war French psychoanalysts such as Rene Kaës, Didier Anzieu, Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and Andre Green, who have all made significant contributions to theories of the group, the dream and the death drive. Each of these analysts have been crucial to Mitchell’s revisionist work on the social and the theory of the other it has yielded, a theory which thinks difference differently. Against the immemorial bind between difference and hatred, Mitchell’s later work reconfigures the ontological premise on which we imagine sameness and difference as the constitutive terms of our being social. In the sibling theory, hysteria is the pathology that indexes a universal trauma produced by the imagined threat posed by the birth of a sibling. For the child of two or three years old, the very idea of another baby carries the threat of displacement. Upon siblinghood the subject is no longer the baby, someone or something has taken their place. Unable to conceive of plurality, this threat is felt as existential. In *Siblings: Sex and Violence* Mitchell explains how this fundamental experience requires a reversal of how we conceive the construction of the other:

In discussions of ‘otherness’, whether of gender, race, class, or ethnicity, hatred of the other is explained by the obvious fact that the ‘other’ is different. Sibling experience displays the contrary; the position that is occupied by the sibling is first experienced as ‘the same’ – hatred is for one who is the same: it is this hatred for a
sameness that displaces which then generates the category of ‘other’ as a protection.  

It is not because the sibling is too different to the subject but precisely because it threatens to be where, and thus who, the subject is that the threat is traumatic, sparking a hysteria which can always be reactivated. Othering is the operation by which we defend against intimacy and its empathetic possibilities, the process by which we create difference as a defence against sameness. Because the sibling is so similar, because it shares the same position, it provides a symbolic referent for all those subsequent things we feel as too close to home, those things we worry will too easily infiltrate the subjective envelope that marks out where and who we are. And, as the theory emphasises, the force of these threats corresponds not to a reality but to a fantasy. For the sibling does not, in actuality, displace the child. It is the fantasy that they will which supplies the sibling experience with its traumatic significance. The category of the other construed through the sibling theory is at the nub of anxieties relating to that which is too proximate, with doubling and splitting, with another ‘me’ that confuses the distinction between bodily boundaries. At the level of the symptom it is hysterical refusals of difference, appeals to recognition and uniqueness, the shrill complaint of displacement which most surely index the pathology. It is from this starting point, which grants questions of otherness relating to gender – and through gender a mode of othering which takes account of ethnicity and colour, an autonomous place in theory – that this thesis approaches the paradigm of horizontality as a potent figuration of online sociality.

25 This is worth emphasising. As Mitchell maintains, the only child may not experience the arrival of an actual sibling, but they certainly will experience the idea that they may yet be given a sibling. In her essay ‘Psychoanalysis, siblings and the social group’, Mitchell references Klein’s discussion of her young patient Erna, reflecting that ‘Judging from them and those other children similarly situated, it would appear that an only child suffers to a far greater extent than other children from the anxiety it feels in regard to the brother or sister whom it is forever expecting, and from feelings of guilt towards them on account of its unconscious impulses of aggression against them in their assumed existence inside it’s mother’s body’. Mitchell, ‘Psychoanalysis, siblings and the social group’, Psycho-analytic Psychotherapy in South Africa, 19 (2011), 46-71 (p. 54).
If the ambition of *Mad Men and Medusas* was to reclaim ‘hysteria as a persistent feature of the human condition’, this was achieved by showing how it is only in certain moments that hysteria is recognised for what it is.26 Hysteria, Mitchell shows, is ‘supremely mimetic’.27 Throughout history male hysteria has been projected onto women, before more recently being relegated from a clinical category to a colloquial dimension of femininity. Thus, even in our moment of male hysteria’s supremacy, such a diagnosis remains beyond the limit of what we appear prepared to name. Without male hysteria, Mitchell argues, hysteria cannot be recovered as a clinical pathology because it does not lay claim to a universal aetiology. Without the theoretical framework provided by the sibling trauma and the recognition of a lateral axis, the questions male hysteria poses to the category of gender, as opposed to sexual difference, cannot be accommodated by psychoanalysis. In such ways, the sibling theory is open and radically productive for new directions in the analysis of masculinist domination and presents an opportunity for rethinking critiques of oppression at the lateral level of race, class and ethnicity.

It bears repeating that without siblings psychoanalysis has, strictly speaking, no theory by which to account for gender.28 In building a theoretical framework along the horizontal, a dimension previously conceived by some analysts as antithetical to the concept of subjectivity, Mitchell develops a

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26 Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, p. 346. Relatedly, Mitchell argues that ‘contrary to common assumption, siblings have been well noted in clinical material’, the reason that ‘the good work [on them] has been dropped and picked up again rather than developed’ is that they have ‘no autonomous place in psychoanalytical theory’. Mitchell, ‘Psychoanalysis, siblings and the social group’, pp. 46-47.


28 ‘As psychoanalysis stands, the concept of gender cannot properly be made to fit into it’. Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 111. On this distinction, Mitchell clarifies: ‘the term ‘sexual difference refers to Freud’s 1933 essay on ”Femininity”’. The line that demarcates where a woman can’t be a man and vice versa. All the aspects the line can fall over – such as psychology, culture and anatomy are never in a reflective or one-to-one relationship with each other. “Sexual difference” is a distinction between men and women that as a distinction is universal in human societies; it is also a distinction without any specific or given content whatsoever. Instead, it finds its content in variable ways which relate to the fact that any society must place some prohibitions on sexual desire and murder’. Mitchell, ‘Debating Sexual Difference, Politics, and the Unconscious: With Discussant Section by Jacqueline Rose’, in *Juliet Mitchell and the Lateral Axis*, ed. by Robert Duschinsky (London: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 77-99, p. 79.
rigorous account of how sexuality and violence are organised through events, desires and anxieties which belong to lateral relations.\textsuperscript{29} If, for example, her interventions hew to the distinction that gives sexual difference, man and woman, a different system of symbolic value and attribution to the categories masculine and feminine, the latter are terms which apply to the less fixed system of gender. This distinction, Mitchell reminds us, originates in the wholly Freudian concept of psychic bisexuality that refers to a subject position rather than an object choice. The sibling symbolically undergirds bisexuality as, if one can share the sibling’s subject position, one can also share their gender – the difference between masculine and feminine is secondary to the sameness of where each sibling stands within the family unit. As I argue in Chapter 1, this distinction may be purposefully applied to the questions posed by the performance of apparently deviant alt-right masculinities.\textsuperscript{30} Much of the media attention afforded to acts of violence perpetrated by incel subcultures, wherein the ‘betamale’ identifies with a chronic deficit of virility if not violence, has dwelled on an apparent feminisation of the male subject which confounds what past experience has prepared us to expect when far right groups perform masculinity. Reading the incel through siblings keeps us keen to the way that, far from countering an insistence on archaic modes of masculinity, such moves are consistent with a pathological irresolution of psychic bisexuality.\textsuperscript{31} Through this lens, femininity is a subject position which can

\textsuperscript{29} By ‘some analysts’ I am thinking in particular of Janine Chasseguet Smirgel’s \textit{Creativity and Perversion}, in which she equates reality with reproductive sexuality (the acceptance of sexual difference) outside of which perversions and other dimensions of non-reproductive sexuality belong strictly to the realm of fantasy: an ‘anal universe in which all particles are equal and interchangeable’. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, \textit{Creativity and Perversion} (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p.4. Referencing this formula in his discussion of Hans Bellmer, Foster recognises the manifest homophobia involved in casting the horizontal axis as a leveller of all differences and therefore meaning. Foster, \textit{The Return of the Real}, p.272 n. 68.


\textsuperscript{31} This irresolution is at the heart of the hysteric’s question ‘Am I a man or a woman?’ To which the answer is always inconclusive – the hysteric cannot fully occupy either position, instead performing masculinity or femininity excessively.
be occupied as an act of aggression by the masculine subject internally divided, its annexation a sign of the violence in sibling sexuality.

If Mitchell provides a framework for why the atrocities which have spilled out from these negotiations with gender point to modes of domination arising from the lateral axis, she also proposes a suggestive term which illustrates the role of sexuality in structuring this violence.32 ‘We are all considered sexually “polymorphously perverse” in infancy. As a species we are at least as violence promiscuous as we are sexual promiscuous’.33 ‘Violence perversion’ describes the free play of the drives thus, just as with the Oedipus complex, some principle is required to organise love and hate, sex and violence, toward objects which are socially acceptable. Accordingly, the prohibition against sibling murder or incest takes the form of what Mitchell calls the Law of the Mother.34 On pain of abandonment, tantamount to death, the mother, representing a position rather than a person, designates as legitimate objects of desire for violence sibling substitutes outside the nuclear family.35 By this law, the mother produces the social child.36 In so doing, however, in the act of love that halts sibling murder, the mother also creates those who are not-brothers and whose killing may be sanctioned. Mitchell opens Siblings Sex and Violence with the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights as an epigraph, which states that ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights […] endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood’.37 The chapters which follow in Siblings

32 For a further discussion of the incel and the atrocities I am referring to see Chapter 1, p. 100 n. 167.
35 Mitchell’s sibling theory stands in vivid contrast to Freud’s account of the group which articulates an organisation of libidinal ties with a leader that corresponds to the fusion of the ego and superego.
36 Importantly, Mitchell sees in the Law of the Mother the socialising prohibition which is otherwise absent in the girl’s journey through the Oedipus complex.
37 Quoted in Mitchell, Siblings, p. ix.
locates the kernel of lateral violence precisely in brotherhood, the reason why, as she later observes, ‘we are always at war somewhere’.  

The principle theoretical coordinates of Mitchell’s work on siblings support the bulk of this project’s analyses. I have introduced them at a more generous, if still much abbreviated, length here to emphasise at the outset that the psychoanalytic conception I take of the horizontal is far removed from any democratic or egalitarian associations. Threaded through the chapters which follow, Mitchell’s ‘horizontal’ is a constant against which other iterations of the horizontal are brought into dialogue. For it is through her models of lateral sex and violence that I intend to make a psychoanalytic argument for situating alt-right political demands in relation to the broader conditions of online sociality.

I hope to be clear that in my view the alt-right provides a uniquely propitious testing ground for Mitchell’s later work. At the root of the sibling theory is the fantasised threat of displacement – which, as the 2017 torchlit ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville so theatrically demonstrated, is vehemently insisted on as a reality by the alt-right – in universal psychic experience.  

But hysteria in the alt-right is a pathology which covers a wide range of expression, from claims of white male victimhood to conspiracies like pizza-gate, from a politics of dispossession to policies accelerating environmental catastrophe. Still, if the alt-right would appear clearly

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39 The refrain ‘Jews will not replace us’ was chanted by protestors as the rally exploited the proposed removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee from what has now been renamed Market Street Park. Several prominent alt-right figures convened what was billed as the first offline assembly of this predominantly online movement. The outpouring of anti-Semitism, misogyny and white nationalism descended into scenes of widespread violence including the murder of anti-fascist activist Heather Heyer by James Alex Fields Jr. Donald Trump stoked further tensions by insisting that ‘there were very fine people on both sides’.

40 Pizza-gate refers to the proto-conspiracy spread on 4chan which would mutate into the Qanon phenomenon. Subscribers to the theory believed that the hacked emails of Clinton campaign manager, John Podesta, contained coded references to a paedophile ring run by senior figures in the Democratic party and housed in the Washington D.C. pizza parlour Comet Ping Pong. Edgar Maddison Welch would later travel from North Carolina with an AR-15 rifle in order to liberate the supposed victims. The Qanon conspiracy has developed this storyline to further integrate and elevate classic anti-Semitic tropes and cast President
legible to a theory of male hysteria at the level of the symptom, the group’s emergence resonates with Mitchell’s theory at a figurative level too. As I have already indicated, the alt-right conspicuously preserves the tropes and modalities by which early online projects made their investments in the paradigm of horizontality the Web was envisaged to instate. My aim is to push the implications of this correspondence as far as I can. I want to use Mitchell’s work on siblings to establish a starting point for thinking masculinity through the lateral axis, for engaging not just psychoanalytic ideas about dynamic conflicts but to engage non-psychoanalytic figurations and objects that pertain to the social. In this sense hysteria, siblings and the lateral axis provide the theoretical and thematic coordinates for an analysis of how aesthetic objects can be seen as expressive of certain psychic dynamics. Thus I will claim that a psychoanalytic conception of the lateral is crucial to establishing a link between the alt-right and net.art that goes beyond mere stylistic appropriation, between the media-technological imagination of different historical moments and, finally, between the work memes do and where they do it.

... But given that Mitchell’s ‘horizontal’ pertains to the degree of universality on which psychoanalytic shibboleths depend, more needs to be said about the local context from which I recover the metaphorical values attached to this latter, historicized, iteration of horizontality. The United States and Europe of the early to middle 1990s provides a centre of gravity for much of what this thesis argues. Those years marked the high point of enthusiasm about the liberatory potential of Web technologies but they also coincided with a juncture in art historical discourse where horizontality re-entered the critical vocabulary from a very different direction. I have in mind here not

just the theorisation of laterality we find in the recovery of surrealism, perhaps most comprehensively outlined in Rosalind Krauss and Yves Alain Bois’ *Formless* project, but a moment in that recovery where the subject of fascism returns as a spectre. The scene I am thinking of here comes from the famous section in Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real* where, watching the coverage of the first Gulf War on television, he writes of:

> A thrill of technomastery (my mere human perception becomes a super machine vision, able to see what it destroys and to destroy what it sees), but also a thrill of an imaginary dispersal of my own body, of my own subjecthood. Of course, when the screens of the smart bombs went dark, my body did not explode. On the contrary, it was bolstered: in a classic fascistic trope, my body, my subjecthood, was affirmed in the destruction of other bodies. In this technosublime, then, there is a partial return of a fascistic subjecthood, which occurs at the level of the mass too, for such events are massively mediated, and they produce a psychic collectivity – a psychic nation, as it were, that is also defined against cultural otherness both within and without.

In a recent issue of *Third Text* devoted to anti-fascism, Angela Dimitrakaki returns to this passage:

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41 Curated by Bois and Krauss, the *Formless: A User’s Guide* exhibition opened at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1996. As the title suggests, the show mobilised Georges Bataille’s concept of the *informe* and its constitutive operations to map a ‘field of relevance’ across a range of artistic practices not previously associated with its legacy. The substantial exhibition catalogue, whose structure echoes the *Critical Dictionary*, can be taken both as an extension of Krauss’ earlier *Optical Unconscious*, and as a response to a contemporary vogue for abjection which is dealt with explicitly by Krauss in her conclusion, pp 235-254. Rosalind Krauss and Yves Alain-Bois, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

42 In this sense, I take Foster’s aim in *Compulsive Beauty* to tell of surrealism ‘not as a movement of love and liberation’ but a story ‘of traumatic shock, deadly desire, compulsive repetition’ as analogous to the way the alt-right provide an opportunity to tell a different tale about the horizontal in digital media. *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. xi.

43 Foster, *Return of the Real*, p 222.
The relevant chapter is titled ‘Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?’, and I have always wondered […] why the demise of postmodernism had to be connected with the re-appearance of a fascistic subject about which nonetheless Foster wonders ‘did it ever go away?’ and ‘does it rest within us all?’ Michel Foucault argued that in his Introduction to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus. On the one hand, then, we have within (Western) art theory this lingering question of whether postmodernism functioned in a double and contradictory mode in relation to fascism: its military-spectacle techno-configuration implied the recall to a fascistic sensibility, while its alleged commitment to undoing the centred ‘humanist’ subject opposed such sensibility.

My own reasons for returning to Foster’s reflections are not the same as Dimitrakaki’s. I am less interested in adding another take on the relations between postmodernism and media technologies, or between postmodernism and fascism per se. I am, however, keen to situate the moment of the Gulf War and what it meant for thinking fascism in art historical discourse as a reference for comprehending our present situation. In my third chapter, the same coverage that enthrals Foster is captioned by Kelly in Gloria Patri. Importantly for my purposes, Kelly perceives in that ‘military-spectacle techno-configuration’ a means to draw out the psychic dynamics at play in masculinity’s pathological entanglement with its codes of violence and sexuality. In this I find good reason to wonder how revisiting that work, which finds some unlikely bedfellows in this thesis, might apply the pressure of that historical conjuncture to our own and, further, to consider how Kelly’s insight could prove germane for reconceptualising the psychic basis of political identities forged in the massive digital mediation of ‘cultural otherness both within and without’.

For Foster, in the lines I cite above, Theweleit’s account of fascist subjectivity looms large. He has the anachronism of that armoured body of the earlier twentieth-century in mind when musing in a note: ‘How much more complicated is the present complex where such shells are more developed, such virility more aggressive, and the technological devices at the disposal of this ego no longer exterior to the body (on the one hand) or within its control (on the other)?’ The situation described here is the other side of the coin to that moment of techno-optimism and its democratizing horizontality. The ego’s fracture in these accounts is less a cause for celebration than a liberation of more destructive energies. The figure of subjectivity being sketched is one which admits the relentless structuring power of Freud’s death drive, an essential concept for this thesis which, like Foster, is curious about how the drive inheres in the mediation of technoviolence. In this sense, my questions elide the parameters of postmodernism. For, whilst I share Frederic Jameson’s conviction that here we are speaking of media that ‘make very different demands on our capacity for aesthetic representation than did the relatively mimetic idolatry of the older machinery of the futurist moment’, I want to ask: What reproductive psychic processes find representation through these novel devices as they relate to a particular politics of intersubjectivity and its modes of mediating and remediating fantasies? In so doing I would like to return the familiar postmodern theme of fragmentation to its early psychoanalytic associations, the fragmentation of the hysteric subject and the fragments of dreams.

46 ‘Armor Fou’ was first published in October in 1991 (56, 215-248), and later developed in Compulsive Beauty.
47 Foster, ‘Armor Fou’, p. 69 n.8. Foster has in mind here Jacques Lacan’s ‘Some Reflections on the Ego’ (The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 34 (1953), 11-17, first presented at the British Psycho-Analytical Society Congress on 2nd May 1951), also a key text for Kelly with Gloria Patri and which I discuss in Chapter 3. In particular Foster seems to be drawn to a model of fascist subjectivity which rests on what Lacan describes as ‘Homo psychologicus’: ‘The relations between this Homo psychologicus and the machines he uses are very striking […] we get the impression to this machine is so very intimate that it is almost as if the two were actually conjoined – its mechanical defects and breakdowns often parallel his neurotic symptoms. Its emotional significance for him comes from the fact that it exteriorizes the protective shell of his ego, as well as the failure of his virility’ (p. 17).
In Chapter 1, I explore the implications of an analogy between dream-work and meme-work for how one might grasp a memetic capacity for psychic transmission in the context of the alt-right. How, in other words, we might uncover the latent contents carried by what Emily Apter has described as ‘technologies of harassment and hate-mongering’. In practice this means resisting certain conventions of meme analysis which either concentrate on mutation, plurality – what we might call their ‘luxuriant multiplicity’ or taxonomy, provenance and dispersion. Against this maximalist approach to thinking about memes I try to follow what Pamela Lee has recently recommended as ‘slow looking in an age of fast history’, staking my reading on what might be given up by a more sustained and ruminative encounter with a singular meme. Following an extended parsing of Jon Rafman’s 2013 video Still Life (Betamale) through Mitchell’s rereading of Freud’s 1913 text A Child is Being Beaten, the bulk of the chapter proceeds through four sections which speak to the psychic dynamics I argue are at work in the alt-right: meme-work (From one betamale to another…), the group and its conditions of psychic communication (The meme factory), male hysteria (Wolf men), and Lateral relations, provide an armature of theoretical and thematic concerns which extend throughout the thesis. Rafman’s work, functioning here as kind of preface, provides a rich tableau for reading a psychoanalytic conception of sexuality and violence through the kind of

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graphic contents alt-right memes specialize in. It allows me to demonstrate the way in which I want to use both Freud and Mitchell’s theoretical frameworks to surface psychic dynamics from memetic forms of representation. The language of dreams is first a language of images, translated into words through the work of interpretation. In other words, it is a language which lends itself to a certain register of visual analysis. Mitchell’s work on siblings opens up psychoanalysis to look at horizontal relationships and in so doing lets onto a vast expanse of analytic possibility. In order to orient my own contribution, I have heeded the prompt of the symptoms performed by the alt-right and, like Freud and Mitchell, taken male hysteria as a starting point. If hysteria is, as Mitchell says, a condition of the social, my argument is that memes are a privileged form by which the pathology is harnessed by a particular politics.

Chapter 2 proposes a reconsideration of net.art aesthetics in the wake of the alt-right through an examination of Martine Neddam’s seminal website project mouchette.org. My concern in this chapter turns on putting the earnest investments mouchette.org makes in an emancipatory or liberatory horizontality flowing from the affordances of Web technologies into contact with the work’s many, and strangely overlooked, relations to surrealism. Opening to mouchette.org’s dialogue with surrealism, I ask what it means to recuperate and project hysteria into the nascent imaginative horizons of Web cultures. For the figure of surrealism we find re-animated on the website would appear to trouble the very optimism it otherwise appears to so devoutly protect. To provide a more expansive discursive context to my line of enquiry, I introduce a third iteration of horizontality in this chapter which emerges from a coterminal return to surrealism in art discourse and its critique by Bois, Krauss and Foster. As these writers make plain, surrealism, especially dissident surrealism, cannot be read through the psychic resonances of the moment’s media-technological imagination without confronting, especially at the level of gender, the dynamics of that fascist subjectivity Foster recognizes on his television. In place of a more definite mapping of the correspondences between these concepts and projects, I suggest a psychoanalytic account of the illusions of the group,
fantasies which are by turns invigorating and paralysing, can be read through the website’s long duration and transhistorical gestures. To this end, I consider how regression might be conceptualised by way of Mitchell’s sibling theory, as a process of desocialization. Ultimately, I argue that mouchette.org appears stuck on a lost conviction that closes to a future it once beckoned.

In the third and final chapter, I discuss two works, Mary Kelly’s *Gloria Patri* and Ubermorgen’s *BREITBART.RED*. My aim here is to think through the alt-right and the memetic image in the register of the death drive. For, whilst in offering a parody of the alt-right, *BREITBART.RED* joins up to my contention that the alt-right haunts net.art, more at issue is the work’s mobilization of memes. Drawing on the metaphorical valences of the shield, which appears as a motif in both works, the theme of this chapter is one of closed systems, doublings, and what Freud called *Verkehrung ins Gegenteil*, reversal into the opposite. I propose that *Gloria Patri*’s analysis of the conjuncture of masculinity and the spectacle of high-tech violence constituted by the Gulf War anticipates our own moment and can be read through the pathology of negative narcissism theorised by Andre Green. In redressing a lacuna in *Gloria Patri*’s critical reception – narcissism in the work’s literature is everywhere taken as a given but never systematically worked through – I attempt to place the fascist coordinates Kelly tracks in relation to how the death drive might be thought through the alt-right.

Crucial to this is Pontalis’ clarification that when we invoke Freud’s death drive we are speaking of ‘a radical unbinding process, a process of enclosure that has no aim but its own accomplishment and whose repetitive nature is the sign of its instinctivity’.\(^52\) The processes which index the death drive, Pontalis argues, may take on social forms and it is toward the grasping of these that my dialogue with *Gloria Patri* and *BREITBART.RED* is ultimately addressed.

I appreciate that in engaging different discursive vocabularies, often remote to the milieus from which my case studies arise, I risk taking concepts out of context. This, I would suggest, is in part down to a legacy of the critical distance psychoanalysis has held from digital cultures. I am also aware that the space I devote to the 1990s suggests the outline of a genealogy for a history of alt-right aesthetics which is not my intention to establish. Thus, I acknowledge that my selection of visual or textual material may be contentious and capricious but I have felt such an approach best fits the line of investigation made possible by the opportunity the alt-right provide to think through online sociality in psychoanalytic terms and, specifically, to apply Mitchell’s theory of a horizontal axis to the ascendancy of male hysteria as a political modality. To prosecute the case I want to make for taking alt-right aesthetics seriously, I have felt it necessary to introduce theories and objects which, whilst not overly accustomed to each other’s company, can gesture at the way relationships between digital infrastructures, the memetic image economy, art which responds to these coordinates and the psychic and political implications of such engagements get us towards the stakes of this thesis’ subject. We know that if masculinity becomes pathological in certain historical moments it does so in ways that make use of certain technological devices available to those moments, devices which are not only expressive of pathologies but provide vehicles for their transmission. In so doing they render the pathology visible. To our present conjunction of masculinity with configurations of violence and technological enrapture, my task has been to bring together frameworks which locate the psychic dynamics at play not just in universal experience but within the current conditions of sociality digital technologies provide.

I hope that the more unexpected turns these chapters take enrich the reader’s encounter with what is, in any case, a heteroclite, ambivalent, contradictory, often opaque and always hard to look at phenomenon. In terms of the figure of subjectivity which emerges from this thesis, despite its insistence on certain ‘universals’ a psychoanalytic perspective does not, indeed could not,
advocate a fascist subject sui generis.\(^{53}\) One that, as Foster has lately put it, can be apprehended as a ‘transcendental category’, reflecting a ‘basic constancy in human experience’ – what Adorno and others attempted to pin down as a ‘personality type’.\(^ {54}\) Instead what I contend Mitchell’s sibling theory helps us to start doing is conceiving a psychoanalytic firmament for what Alberto Toscano calls the ‘intensely superstructural character’ of today’s ‘fascistic traits’.\(^ {55}\) This would mean, to begin with, recognizing the implications of hysteria as a condition of the social, and male hysteria in particular, for the abstractions by which we describe our media-technological conjuncture. The mediation of those familiar symptoms – the admixture of internal and external enemies, the insistence on identity and supremacy, persecutory fantasies and the imagined grievance of displacement – by digital technologies demands serious interrogation of what psychic resonances they harbour. Starting from dreams and memes has, in part, covered for a wish that psychoanalytic vocabularies renew the courage of their conviction in discourses to which psychoanalysis has ceded its authority. It is but one of the ways in which we might put meme-work to work.


\(^{54}\) Foster, ‘Charisma and Catastrophe’, p. 25. But nor does it necessarily lead one to imagine, as Enzo Traverso has cautioned, that the social, political, economic and technological complex of our historical moment have produced something too distinct from the fascisms of the 1920s and 1930s to bear fruitful comparison. Traverso deploys, somewhat reluctantly, the term ‘post-fascism’ to describe a situation in which ‘On the one hand, the new far right is no longer fascist; on the other hand, we cannot define it without comparing it with fascism. The new right is a hybrid thing that might return to fascism, or it could turn into a new form of conservative, authoritarian, populist democracy’. Nicolas Allen and Martín Cortés, ‘Fascisms Old and New: An Interview with Enzo Traverso’, Jacobin, 4 February 2019 <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/02/enzo-traverso-post-fascism-ideology-conservatism> [accessed 10 January 2019]. See also Traverso, The New Faces of Fascism. For an opposing position, see Timothy Snyder, On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth-Century (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

\(^{55}\) Alberto Toscano, ‘Notes on Late Fascism’, Historical Materialism, 2 April 2017 <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/notes-late-fascism> [accessed 5 May 2017].
‘Even when we dream, we are not alone’
Jacqueline Rose, *Mass Psychology*¹

In thinking about how memes work, what work they do and by what means, one quickly finds oneself in need of a language with which to think. Or rather, one encounters a choice of various languages which offer different vantages on this meme-work depending on which disciplinary perspective they privilege. At the level of subjectivity however, a conceptual vocabulary sophisticated enough to apprehend the ways wordplay, humour, mnemonic and fragmentary symbols arranged in polysemic sequences of image and word cohere into meaning has been around for a long time. In Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* one finds several terms which close the lag between the consulting rooms of fin de siècle Vienna and these ephemeral digital items of cultural transmission abounding in our present landscape of network velocities and algorithmic over-determination.² But if words like

² Limor Shifman offers the following definition of memes: ‘(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with
‘displacement’, ‘condensation’ and ‘secondary revision’, find purchase on
the formal or pictorial composition of memes, might they also help unlock
less visible, less conscious layers of communication?

Famously, dreams provided uniquely propitious material for uncovering the
dynamics and processes on which psychoanalysis was founded. This chapter
proceeds from the conviction that, thought through the vocabulary of dream-
work, memes might be similarly available to the interpretation of
unconscious disclosures; that they might, in this sense, be made to speak the
language of dreams. For if memes now play a role in constructing the
subject amongst others, through others, the task of their interpretation or
interrogation finds a marker in Freud’s demonstration that there are certain
idiosyncratic and polyglot forms which offer privileged insights into the
mechanics of such processes. Indeed, the more one looks at it, the more
such a pairing – which extends the conceptual rhyme that links gene to
meme – makes sense. And through that peculiar shared logic one might
even consider such a coupling entirely appropriate to the absurdist
sensibility of memes. By Freud’s own insistence the stuff of dreams –
encoded messages, erratic narrative structures and associative interpretation
– provided the base material for his most important contribution to the
project of constructing a theory of subjectivity. Dreams were not only
images for his patients to think with but crucial for the development of his
analytic thought.3 The dream was the proverbial royal road but to see where
this road was heading one had to look past a surface image to a set of
operations through which the unconscious might, however modestly, erode
its resistance to our understanding. In which spirit, I will argue that dream
theory, far from inimical to an analysis of memes, may rather reveal the
work that they otherwise labour to conceal, work that is performed and
effected at the level of subjectivity.

awareness of each other; and (c) were circulate, imitated and/or transformed via the
Internet by many users’. Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT
Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953), pp. 1-
627 (p. 49).
Emily Apter has recently asked if there is anything serious to be said of memes. From the perspective of this project, the examples which spring most readily to mind would suggest that there is. For one, look to the message posted by the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter shortly before his attack in October 2018 which killed eleven people and injured a further seven (figure 2.1). The image features two stick figures portraying a before and after of the shooter, on the right on the day of his massacre and on the left one year previously. In the temporal space this ‘counter-signal meme’ opens up, much has apparently changed. Accordingly, the legend that heads both images describes a process under cover of a journey – ‘the libertarian-to-far-right-pipeline’ – to which it credits that transformation and thus the act it pre-emptively celebrates. The phrase ‘libertarian-to-far-right-pipeline’ sounds depressingly mundane, dating from an in-joke cultivated by contributing writers to The Right Stuff blog four years previous to the Pittsburgh attack, but in that time it has become, to paraphrase the shooter, a terrifyingly real thing. The meme, in this context, traces the process of radicalisation through a matrix of online nodes and would therefore seem to require little further justification to claim its seriousness, even if the seriousness at hand here is a different one than Apter has in mind. For whilst pipelines of radicalisation do not require internet memes, internet memes do expose, distribute and perhaps amplify the means by which their totalising worldviews lock into place. Still, the question Apter poses is a good one. Not least because if there is something serious to say about memes not only are vocabularies required with which to say it, but the possibility is left open that what is serious may emerge in friction with these different vocabularies. In the example of the Pittsburgh shooter, whilst it is not just memes that are at play in this space between the two stick figures, the process of transformation the meme is deployed to illustrate reminds us that these two

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4 Apter, p. 5.
5 A counter-signal meme describes a genre of alt-right memes created by Microsoft’s Paint application and portraying reductively characterised political standpoints. See <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/counter-signal-memes> [accessed 8 August 2018].
6 The Right Stuff was one of the first major alt-right forums. Founded by Mike Enoch, it now hosts a network of content streams and is responsible for propagating such memes as ‘cuckservative’ and the anti-Semitic triple parentheses.
figures are one subject, that the meme is at work on, in and, crucially, through the subject.

Freud was clear that the work dreams do is not creative but transformative. The distinction is useful here too, particularly in its resonance with a certain quality or aspect of memes which comes to the fore when they are taken as objects of visual analysis. Put plainly, memes are not easy to deal with as art objects, or at least as singular art objects. ‘Transformative but not creative’ might capture the way that, taken individually, memes may appear to offer little in the way of visual sustenance. Generally speaking, memes stymie the type of reflection more conventional to the study of art history – there are fewer footholds for an unaccustomed curiosity to catch hold of. At the level of the image they are invariably, to borrow a couple of terms more familiar to the discipline, both assuredly kitsch and relentlessly flat. Their postmodern means of manufacture and dissemination seem to require little in the way of interpretation. It’s all there, it’s all up front. In contrast to the fabled richness of dreams, memes can easily feel impoverished, operating according to a different economy of intrigue. They appear thin where dreams are thick. And this thinness, this inured resistance to the permissiveness of depth (as oppose to the permissiveness of alteration), is easy to take as wholly resistant to conveying gentler forms of communication.

Yet, to say that dreams have a fabled richness is to overlook that, despite Freud’s best efforts, dreams too are not always taken seriously. ‘Freud was a collector of farts and grimaces’, writes John Forrester, ‘an archaeologist of rubbish avant la lettre, as well a collector of the fading yet precious detritus of Western civilization’. 7 It is only ‘by Freud’s principles of interpretation’, the principles of dream-work, that these ‘everyday objects are transformed’. 8 Where memes – a more modern detritus – are concerned, it is

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8 Ibid., p. 123.
a commonplace to infer that they acquire a depth of meaning by other means and by other memes. The meme is a vehicle of reproduction, its artfulness can be ascribed to the way its variations measure the exercise of a shared working out through so many iterations on a theme. The creative enterprise is collective. This perspective reflects and holds to the term’s biological moorings within the interdisciplinary vocabularies of the digital that locate a meme’s import almost exclusively at the level of its plurality. By this dominant reading memes are only conceived as always already in movement, or rather in perpetual transition – with transition taken as the predicate for transmission and vice versa. A case of condition-as-form, they emerge as, and in, transliteration between several different layers and registers of knowledge which they open and expose to each other.

In Apter’s terms, they create, an ‘alphabet of political literacy’ which ‘give[s] form to psychopower’. Yet whilst Apter is surely correct in her detection of the meme as a political technology that operates by switching between different levels of language, the consensus on positing the meme as a categorically plural object risks overlooking more resistant modes of interpretation. For example, what is often obscured by the idea of the

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10 *Part iconotropic sigle (acronym, rhebus, emblem, insignia), part morpheme transliterating visual and verbal messages, part signature monogram prefiguring the anonymous online handle, part ‘psychotechnology’ […] memes constitute the alphabet of political literacy’. Apter, p. 23.

11 Ibid. For Apter ‘memes are construed by navigating diverse fields and subdisciplines: evolutionary biology, phenomenology, cognitive psychology, semiotics, technologies of neuroimaging, epi- and ontogenetics’. Ibid., p. 6.

12 By this mode I intend something of what Adorno writes of as thinking as ‘the force of resistance’, that is, ‘a comportment, a form of praxis’ pledged in favour of ‘transformation’ and against ‘the reproduction of what already exists anyway’. See Adorno, ‘Resignation’,
meme as a scene of perpetual mutation is precisely its opposite – the stilled singular image, word or thing that may also be readily called to mind at the prompt of the word ‘meme’. I contend that this idea of a still, singular and suspended image may be worth indulging. It pulls into focus the dissonance between the meme’s figuration in the popular imagination – as, for example, a singular image, and the means we have to capture them (in, for example, the meme cataloguing website knowyourmeme.com) as well as the tension between innovation and the template which is the engine of memetic productivity. Relatedly, these tensions and their engagement with the aesthetic condition and status of the image, of representability in a broad sense, take me in the direction of another resonance to be found with dreams.

Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, one of the most authoritative voices on Freud’s project, reminds us of the simple fact that dreams are dreamt in images but interpreted through words. The translation from image to word is thus a condition of their study and marks the dream’s departure from the realm of private experience toward its emergence into a discursive meaning, where it obtains in the analytic setting as the creation of more than one author. Pontalis is aiming here at the different states a dream may exist in – as object, as place, as message, as text – and what this means for its interpretation:

[…] the dream-work is what interests [Freud], i.e. the series of transformations brought into play by catalysts […] leading to the end-product: the dream narrated, recorded, put into words. Little is said about what happens to the product once it has left the dream-machine, about what occurs before the machine is in motion.13

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The entry to this dream-machine, which we must surely take as incorporating both the work of the dream and the work of the analyst – the work of encoding and decoding – is the space between analyst and analysand. In this in-between the manifest content submits to cogs of interpretation which may be as brutalising to the dream-as-experience as they are enlightening of the dream-as-content. Interpretation thus risks effacing the dream as an experiential object on the altar of theory. Entailed in the distinction Pontalis is taken with here is a crucial tension between the dream-as-one-thing-or-another and what happens to the dream when it is exposed to more than one person. Those monocular analyses which treat the dream in a singular dimension risk perverting the dream’s meaning in a way wholly at odds with the aim of a therapeutic and meaningful interpretation: ‘psychoanalysis’, Pontalis writes, ‘strangles the eloquence of dream-life’.14

In accepting a seriousness of memes such a perversion of their meaning appeals, especially if we are to take perversion in this context as a resistant mode of interpretation. On condition, that is, that this strangling is applied to the effectiveness of certain memes as a ‘political medium’ whose association ‘with viral consciousness and mass violence underscores’, as Apter writes, ‘their susceptibility to appropriation and self-sabotage’.15 At least a good part of what follows commits to this idea – that there is a way of reading alt-right memes against themselves which might pervert their functioning.16 The purpose of dwelling at the outset on the various senses in which we might rethink memes through the lessons of dream-work is to acknowledge the tensions these different aspects of the meme expose and, further, to indicate how they are thrown into relief around the question of interpretative vocabularies. For if an object may be bound up and restricted by the conventions of one way of looking and thinking about things – a dimension or discipline – a modest revolution in perspective may reveal another set of possible descriptions. This sentiment guides and informs

14 Ibid., p. 33. 
15 Apter, p. 8. 
16 I am thinking here of Foster’s notion of ‘père-version, [a strategic] turning from the father that is a twisting of his law’. See also Chapter 2, p. 140 n. 58.
much of the work on memes that this project sets out to do. For if the lethality of projects to which certain memes are enlisted reveals at least one aspect of their seriousness, it is against such backdrops that the stakes of readings which disrupt, distort and even pervert their agency – their ‘work’ – will come into view.

One could say that just such a perverse interpretation is what dream-work first offered Freud – if we remember that perversion describes the displacement of the sexual instinct away from its ‘natural’ object. (Pontalis uses the term to imply the aim of interpretation is misrouted away from the proper aim of psychoanalysis.) Yet in transposing the stuff of myth, folklore and superstition (becoming, in his own words, ‘a partisan of antiquity and superstition’) into the domain of science, Freud supplied an important precedent for delivering the meme from the grip of those discourses which have held sway over its interpretation. For Freud won his discoveries through such bold juxtapositions of the analytical frame and the object of his study. Subjected to his new science, a different register of enquiry demanded of the material a more patient mode of reflection and observation, one entirely foreign to the status of the dream in the popular and academic imagination of the time. That patience is also appealed to here, as a crucial analytical weapon to be deployed against the grain of memes. It offers one important, if and because perverse, way of doing meme-work.

As materials for experimenting with this way of going about the meme, those examples taken below are culled as representative objects, isolated and suspended for a sustained reflection at odds with the type of analysis

18 A reversal, that is, of the offer posed to science by dreams to be the ‘gateway into the world of mysticism’. See Freud, ‘Lecture xxx (Dreams and Occultism)’, 1932, in SE, vol. xxii, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1964), pp. 31-56 (p. 31).
conventional to their genre. In many ways this arrest merits a measure of violent metaphor, for a stilled or static meme is also a dead meme. Like some sharks, without perpetual movement and mutation they simply cease to be. Memes may be said to have achieved a privileged status in today’s image economy not on the grounds of whatever aesthetic quantum they carry but because they represent a dominant paradigm of the condition created and inhabited by digital images. They exemplify the formulation image-as-exchange. In this they are irreducibly social objects, objects whose primary aesthetic function may be reimagined as descriptive not so much of an individual’s subjective experience but of how those experiences negotiate, interlock or remain remote from each other in groups. Coining the term, Richard Dawkins was keen to emphasise the near homonym with gene, underscoring the way that such phenomena emerge not in a singular presentation or encounter but rather as a series or sequence which is apprehended most clearly through a vast sample.19 But if the gene would make legible transgenerational mutations, the meme as its ‘cultural’ corollary would write the intersubjective relations between one and others. If we are, then, thinking of group images and the work they do qua this designation, it would follow that a theory of group subjectivity will also be required to gain purchase on the object and open out the language of dream-work into the social.

Perhaps one of the reasons why psychoanalysis’ concern with the social, rather than just the individual, still needs to be underlined in discussions like this owes something to Freud’s group theory. From Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego and Totem and Taboo to Moses and Monotheism and Civilisation and Its Discontents the major texts on groups strive to escape the image of the father and thus remain beholden, figuratively at least, to the centrality of the individual. Unsurprisingly then, when Theodore Adorno – in his Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda, or more recently, Hal Foster, turn these ideas towards an analysis of historical or

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19 In this way, Dawkins gives license to talk about the social subject of memes to be already the group, through which the meme demonstrates, by the sequence of its replications, a trace analogous to a pathology.
contemporary neo-fascism, the prominence of the ‘leader’, of the Fuhrerprinzip, remains intact. Thus, despite the revelation in Group Psychology that hostility and violence are integral to the very formation of the social, that the group is psychotic and regressive as a psychic subject, formed through doublings and splittings and sustained by illusions, such moments of radical insight remain shaded by the libidinal ties and identifications with a leader that colour the drift in Freud’s work on groups toward his reflections on monotheism and a confrontation with his own faith – not least in himself and his project. A further problem in applying Freudian theory to more recent emanations of fascistic subjectivity arises at the level of organisation. For if Freud’s chief examples of groups, the church and the army, may have reflected the rigid hierarchical command structures of twentieth-century fascism, they resemble far less the anonymous online masses that distinguish themselves by their de-centered and lateral formations.

In order to escape the primacy of the individual subject as the touchstone of analysis and to more effectively address the ‘social’ quality of memes, it is the contention of this chapter that a body of work which opens up the psychoanalytic subject laterally will be required. And ‘laterally’ here describes a point of view that not only understands the subject to be already and always a social subject but that takes the process of becoming social as the privileged perspective of analysis. As such the title ‘Meme-work’ can be read as something of a red herring, itself a dissemblance behind which lies the chapter’s latent theoretical model. That theory is provided by the work of Juliet Mitchell whose writings on the subject of siblings over the past twenty years have been committed to mining the ways in which the existence of brothers and sisters contributes to the subject’s passage from the pre-social to the social, from an ‘I’ to a ‘we’. If the methodology of

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20 See also, Adorno with Else Frenkel-Brunswik and others, The Authoritarian Personality, as well as Foster, ‘Père Trump’, and ‘Charisma and Catastrophe’.
21 On this current in Freud’s work see Rose’s ‘Mass Psychology’.
22 It is on these grounds that I am drawn to the work of Rene Kaës and Didier Anzieu who, like Bion in England, pioneered work with groups after the Second World War in France. The groups these analysts worked with were often free to assemble their own organizational structures.
dream-work can therefore be deployed to elaborate memes’ operation within a psychoanalytic framework, it is Mitchell’s sibling work which will support an analysis that goes beyond meme-work, and memes themselves, toward a way of thinking about online group formation which can be glimpsed through a subjectivity that both produces, and is produced by, alt-right memes.23

Much like Freud’s work on dreams, Mitchell’s sibling theory emerged from a sustained engagement with the male hysteria. Indeed, Freud’s first intuition of the dream’s peculiar representational mechanisms arose when writing his *Studies on Hysteria*. These mechanisms provided a template for the type of symbolic relationship psychoanalysis would observe between cause and symptom.24 For Mitchell, it was the gradual clinical erasure of the hysterical and the relegation of hysteria to an aspect of predominantly feminine personality that eventually led to her tilting of the vertical Freudian axis built on the inter-generational parent-child relationship.25 In so doing Mitchell suggests a horizontal axis, interpenetrating with the vertical, along which siblings are plotted as the primary model by which a child understands and becomes embedded in peer networks. In other words, as the intra-generational path that leads the subject from the family to the social, from the individual to the group. The hysterical is disinterred by this reorientation and (re)established ‘as a psychopathology of everyday life’.26 Thus reclaimed, hysteria finds its lateral aetiology in the crucial and traumatic experience of displacement by a sibling. The insistence is that one

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23 As I will clarify, whilst the notion of extracting a group subjectivity from the alt right is a vexed question, it can only be premised by working out, locating and refining some point of cohesion amongst the group’s constituent interests. For this, Florian Cramer’s proposal of a memetic alt-right locates a group sensibility on 4chan and thus something one might be able to work with as an aesthetic position. On this coherence, see Ana Teixeira Pinto, ‘Capitalism with a Transhuman Face: The Afterlife of Fascism and the Digital Frontier’.


26 Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 84.
is seen, recognised as a unique and therefore valued subject, equal amongst others that share one’s position.27

For Mitchell the sibling situation stands for the primal threat of violence and splitting that Freud identifies (albeit elsewhere – in archaic patricide) in the ties which will in time forge the group. From such a starting point one can see how Mitchell’s emphasis on displacement leads this principle of social formation back to the question of male hysteria and the fears, anxieties and forms of domination on which white nationalism and gender violence trade. Yet in returning hysteria to the crucible of the group’s formation, Mitchell also leaves her theory open to dream-work. The relationship between dreams, psychopathology and the group in Freud’s early work suggested that if the group was like the hysteric in its functioning then the hysteric, in turn, owed his condition to a conflict whose pathological relation to the symptom could be illuminated through the interpretation of dreams. The dream, Freud writes in the introduction to the first edition of The Interpretation of Dreams, ‘is the first of a series of abnormal psychic formations’ whose ‘succeeding members’ are ‘the hysterical phobias, the obsessions, the delusions’.28 What is common to each stage of this series is a formation which expresses conflict at the basis of psychic functioning, conflicts whose resolution or irresolution set the course of subjectivity. In this way the metaphoric and psychoanalytic provenance of dream-work’s constitutive terms engage the crucial relation between language, psychic reality and spatiality which grounds representations in thought, word and image in fantasies relating to place and position. As Pontalis writes:

[…] every dream presupposes a space where the presentation can take place. For the important thing is not [just] that the dream unfolds like a film […] it can just as well assume the shape of a drama, a series or a polyptych. But there can be no film without a

27 In this emphasis Mitchell draws out the strand in Freud’s thinking that can plotted through the way his work on groups developed out of his theoretical grappling with narcissism, a conjunction from which his second topography emerged.
screen, no play without a stage, be it just one imaginary line, no picture without a canvas or frame. The dream is a rebus; but to write out the rebus, something like a sheet of paper is needed; to put a jigsaw puzzle together, one needs a thin sheet of cardboard.\textsuperscript{29}  

What Pontalis is describing here sounds very much like what we might want to call a formal or technical support – a device by which, as Rosalind Krauss has argued, meaning is scaffolded onto the autonomous features of a particular medium.\textsuperscript{30}  The association holds because what Pontalis sets out is the way in which dreams generate a field through which their meaning is made sensible. By this promise the dream offered to make legible the vast realm of unconscious fantasy and remains the most accessible source of its illustration. But, as we have seen through the analogy of the interpretive machine (the machine that does the work of the dream and the work of interpretation) this dream space is shared by others. Further, it is shared by others through the sharing of the dream and its visual or linguistic contents. Much of what we read about memes has emphasised their ability to constitute and circumscribe groups through a shared tropological language and exclusionary vernacular whilst at the same time privileging the meme as a key medium with which to interpret subcultures. There is a strong sense, then, in which both memes and dreams code a certain dimension of sociality that is legible not just as a field or territory for the group, but as an expression of a shared subjectivity. Positioning the meme as such, as an analogon of the dream object endowed with the potential to generate inter-subjective and interpretative spaces as well as the power to both encode and decode meaning, brings into view the work of both Didier Anzieu and René Kaës on the social nature of dreams. For Anzieu, the group is ‘like a dream’, a repository of manifest contents describing unconscious fantasies that the subject goes to as readily and as regularly as they do to sleep.\textsuperscript{31}  It is ‘a place

\textsuperscript{29} Pontalis, ‘Between the Dream as Object and the Dream-text’, p.29.  
where images are transformed in interaction’.\textsuperscript{32} The ‘group-like-a-dream’ thus describes a psychic situation that is replete with its own modes of thinking and communication. And, as the metaphor of the machine reminds us, those modes and their obverse (their interpretation) are processes which help to put the dream in its proper place. The machine in this way supposes a space we might imagine fit for what Kaës, leaning on Anzieu’s work, calls a ‘dream factory’, a figuration which emerged from his concept of ‘dream polyphony’, itself a term that attends to ‘the interdiscursivity specific to the associative chain’.

[Dream polyphony] describes how the dream is worked on by, and in, a multiplicity of spaces and times, images and voices. It integrates the idea of a plural, common, and shared dream space […] dreams are formed in relation to each other and can be interpreted in terms of their relations of reciprocal support. The hypothesis of dream polyphony leads us into a ‘dream factory’ where several dream spaces interpenetrate, where several dreamers make signs to each other and make themselves heard by several dreamers and several listeners, internal and external.\textsuperscript{34}

Elsewhere and in a different key Pontalis has written of how:

The multiplicity of voices doesn’t come entirely from childhood: I believe we are, fortunately, never done with appropriating others, never done with becoming one self’s other, but at least as far as I’m concerned, the voices are always linked to a place.\textsuperscript{35}

Whilst Pontalis’ subject here is ostensibly memory, the evocation of a set of particular places helps return us from a theoretical geography. Specifically –


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 183.

and Kaës’ notion of a dream factory is the prompt – towards locating those places from where alt-right memes first echo. The notorious image board site 4chan has been mythologised by internet culture and the media alike as precisely a meme factory; a site whose prescriptive anonymity affords constant opportunity to trade subject positions and become ‘one self’s other’. As with Pontalis’ school rooms, gardens and hospitals in the lines above, 4chan can be read as a site of origin for the memetic alt-right as a subcultural phenomenon. As I will discuss later on, the site’s significance for the sensibility espoused by the alt-right, their self-claimed novelty, is substantial and as such marks 4chan as something of a locus for meme-work. If not a machine for the alt-right meme’s interpretation then certainly a place of emergence, encoding, perpetual transformation and exchange. In short, the kind of place where the conditions appear to be set for the meme’s production as a political technology of the far right. The analysis which now follows reserves Apter’s conviction that ‘post internet’, many artists ‘fully claim the meme as an activist medium’ deployed against what she calls its ‘negative capability’. 36 For, whilst not by any means an ‘activist’ work, the project under consideration addresses itself directly to this site of memetic intensity, prompting questions about what such engagement with the generative conditions of memes may risk.

36 Apter, pp. 12, 8.

A betamale is being beaten

On 25 of September 2013 an embedded Youtube link was posted anonymously, and to the considerable surprise of other users, on the /mu/ (music) forum of the notorious image-board site 4chan. One ‘anon’, as over ninety percent of 4chan users choose to be known, 37 was seemingly
impressed by the way its imagery deftly synthesizes some of the obscure internet subcultures 4chan hosts, observing that whoever made this video clearly ‘knows his audience’. Another anon questioned whether, rather than identifying with the 4chan community, the creator of the video might instead be ‘shit talking my shitty lifestyle’. The first in a trilogy of short films by the Canadian artist Jon Rafman that explore what he calls ‘the murkier corners of the Web’, and the only one of these to be first shown online, Still Life (Betamale) opens with the word ‘PLAY’ flashing in green at the top right hand corner of the screen whilst a man in a pink suit points at the viewer. The gesture is followed by a medley of found material – video, anime stills, screenshots, webcam footage, recordings of retro gaming, message board memes, specialist manga channels, fetish community sites.

The betamale, constitutive other to the macho ‘alpha’ male, overlaps extensively with the figure of the involuntary celibate or incel which has received increasing media attention since Elliot Rodger killed seven and injured fourteen people in Isla Vista nine months after Rafman posted Still Life on 4chan. Emerging from the same online milieu, the incel and the betamale comprise a major strand of alt-right subculture and denote similar assumptions about gender, sexuality and violence. The term profiles, as Angela Nagle argues in her article The New Man of 4chan, the site’s dominant model of masculinity. Thus the betamale’s presentation, one might even say portraiture, in Rafman’s work provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between the imagery of a particular subculture and the political and sexual violence it might advocate, to ask how, and by what structure of fantasy, does murderousness shelter in such peculiar forms.

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39 Ibid.
41 Nagle, ‘The New Man of 4chan’.
At the beginning and at the end of the video, Rafman lingers on what is, to my mind at least, the most arresting image of *Still Life*, first zooming toward the perimeter of the frame before reappearing and then fading to black at the video’s end (figure 2.2). It shows a grainy photograph of an unknown man with pants wrapped around his head in the manner of a bondage mask whilst he holds a revolver to each temple. The man is obese and shirtless, the size, colour and pattern of the underwear suggest they belong to a young girl. The room he is sitting in is dark and cluttered with the debris of a teenager’s bedroom. Posters behind his head show characters from manga animations which will feature heavily throughout the rest of the four minutes and fifty-four seconds of the video. In the following passage more low-resolution photographs of dark, mostly fetid, rooms are presented in a slideshow. Each contains some, often elaborate, configuration of a bed or chair and a monitor arranged for the purpose of spending prolonged periods of time at the computer. The video takes a keen interest in the abject condition of these lairs, hovering over keyboards covered in a morass of congealing food matter, drinks cans, bucket toilets, cigarette butts and discarded pizza boxes.

Exiting these chambers *Still Life* transitions into what might be seen on the screens they house: found footage and animations drawn from niche roleplaying subcultures of the type that suggest extreme commitment and devotion from users congregating in some of the more esoteric corners of the internet; furry fandom featuring animal anthropomorphic pornography; masked young women dressed as anime characters performing seductively for a camera; scenes taken from hentai pornography – a genre distinguished by its staging of fantastical sexual encounters between human and non-human characters and objects – as well as graphic gestures to numerous other fetishes. Overlaying the images, a synthesized voice-over tells us that ‘whatever shift in your spiritual life occurs, fragments such as these surface’ (01:27). Approximately two-thirds of the way through the video, images of a profoundly violent nature crescendo by way of a montage sequence in which a series of brutal pictures, mostly taken from anime, rapidly appear and dissolve into each other. The movement represents a sharp break from the rhythmic continuity of the rest of the work, in which we are also shown
images of mutilated and melting bodies, two hanging scenes and one of a character dressed as a fox drowning slowly in mud (figure 2.3).

Clearly, the erotic and violent currents of the video are already at the surface of Still Life’s psychic bricolage. The fantasies arrayed in Rafman’s panoply cleave to the connection Freud draws in his 1908 essay on Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming between the artistic imagination, the flights of the mind in reverie, and the kernel of these activities in dreams and the unconscious fantasies of our childhood.42 Dreams, by this reading, not only expose unconscious fantasy but reveal it as the source of all imaginative enterprise, including waking dreams.43 Speaking at the exhibition of Still Life at the Zabludowicz Collection in London, Rafman explicitly made space for psychoanalytic theory as a tool with which to probe his material, observing that ‘in the various subcultures I reference, there is something infantile in that their desires are base and regressive as well as in the sense that they’re simply returning to the original desire, seeking those pleasures through the screen’.44 The video’s display in the exhibition in London, at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and at the Stedelijk Museum, was framed by vast womb-like structures which cocooned the audience. These could be encountered as environments in which the viewer is invited to

42 The text was first given as a lecture in 1907 before being published the following year.
43 Freud writes: ‘I cannot pass over the relation of phantasies to dreams. Our dreams at night are nothing else than phantasies like these, as we can demonstrate from the interpretation of dreams. Language, in its unrivalled wisdom, long ago decided the question of the essential nature of dreams by giving the name of ‘day-dreams’ to the airy creations of phantasy. If the meaning of our dreams usually remains obscure to us in spite of this pointer, it is because of the circumstance that at night there also arise in us wishes of which we are ashamed; these we must conceal from ourselves, and they have consequently been repressed, pushed into the unconscious. Repressed wishes of this sort and their derivatives are only allowed to come to expression in a very distorted form. When scientific work had succeeded in elucidating this factor of dream-distortion, it was no longer difficult to recognize that nightdreams are wish-fulfilments in just the same way as day-dreams—the phantasies which we all know so well’. Freud, ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’, 1907/1908, in SE, vol. ix, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1959), pp. 141-154 (pp.148-149).
inhabit an alternative dimension of reality, to step, as it were, into fantasy. It is an offer which suggests a homology between online social space, dream space and fantasy space that we will reencounter later on and which, therefore, I want to take a few moments to address at the start. The strategy Rafman pursues depends on a mystifying image of the Web as impossibly vast and essentially unknowable so as to support the portrayal of its navigation as a feat of self-exploration. Accordingly, one’s navigations are also in some way self-analyses – one finds and confronts representations of intuited desires that might be given shape and reflected back to the subject. This oneiric figuration is perhaps closer to characterizations of cyberspace familiar to the 1990s than our current imaginary, yet what gets left out, crucially, is the dream-work: the means by which surface or manifest contents transform representations of latent desires that are not only structural to the unconscious but, by definition, obscured from conscious perception. Thus while Rafman misses the psychoanalytic metaphor of depth when he talks about the ‘deep internet’ as the source of his material – deep for Freud refers to early or archaic materials, not that which is simply bizarre or hard to find – he also misses the resistances that would both block our access to, and shape the interpretation of, the meaning of these contents. No barriers need to be broken down to access the horror of Still Life’s fantasies. The dominant mode of engagement is more akin to the nineteenth-century spectacle of world fairs than to any clinical dynamic. So, whilst one can work with the metaphor, indeed much of this thesis couldn’t do without it, and make use of claims for how the online experience is integrated into negotiations with subjectivity, entertaining this proposition also demands we remain alert to what such broad brush assertions leave out. Returning to Still Life, I want to hold on to this scepticism and so look past the fetish as the more obvious starting point for a psychoanalytic reading of the work, turning instead to a different set of theoretical coordinates.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{45} For Freud the fetish, as a perversion, was the negative of the neuroses. By this analogy, my argument is for looking beneath the manifest content of Still Life to a more latent hysteria.
In proposing that we treat Still Life as a dream, the video’s voice-over immediately locates a subject. It addresses a ‘you’ who is in a dream, who is dreaming, but at the same time we are unsure as to whether this ‘you’ is also ‘me’, the viewer. We have already, then, stumbled onto Pontalis’ distinction between the different modalities of the dream. For dreaming and interpreting the dream are two different things; they describe the input and output of the dream machine as well as the position of the analyst and analysand. (In passing, one might also note that this split also inflects the way that Rafman constructs two distinct positions from which the video may be engaged – the knowing viewer of the gallery and the unknowing, and unknown 4chan user who, in turn, knows this material in ways the gallery viewer is presumed not to.) Thus this ‘you’ is at once a fiction, an unstable and fluid category both inclusive and exclusive. Is its speaker an external or internal voice? On the one hand confusing this boundary confounds the apparatus by which meaning might be revealed, it suggests a defensive strategy deployed to resist interpretation. On the other, the subject is shown as already split. The unconscious speaks in many voices whilst in dreams representations of the self may appear simultaneously and in several guises. From the off, then, it isn’t easy to separate out positions, to sketch the levels at which certain mechanisms are operating. For Rafman’s slick ensemble at once calls to mind the work of secondary revision – that mechanism by which the dream elements and fragments have been organised into a scene which nonetheless labours to disguise the configuration of the fantasy it conceals and contains. Frustrating, at least to begin with, the impulse to situate, to mark out who is who and where they are is, it seems, a condition of entering the work’s space.

In Freud’s 1919 paper, A Child is Being Beaten, he identifies a ‘core’ masturbation fantasy which proceeds in three stages. The first is ‘completely represented by the phrase ‘my father is beating the child’’. A child, Freud adds, that the fantasist hates. In the next scene ‘the person beating remains

the same (that is, the father); but the child who is being beaten has been changed into another one and is now invariably the child producing the phantasy’, a configuration neatly represented by the statement: ‘I am being beaten by my father’. But this second phase, ‘the most important and the most momentous of all’, is nevertheless a ‘construction of analysis’ inasmuch as it is never remembered. The third and final scene resembles the first with two important distinctions, the first being that the beating figure is now only a ‘representative of the father, such as a teacher’ and, secondly, that the child being beaten is no longer the fantasist. Instead the victim has been multiplied into a number of other children who are, significantly, ‘not personally known to the subject’. From this tripartite structure Freud warns of the variability of the fantasy’s ‘alterations and elaborations’ both in regards to its form and the precise nature of the punishments and humiliations it stages.

However, in categorising *A Child is Being Beaten* principally as a story of pleasure, one that mines the spectrum of sadism and masochism, voyeurism and exhibitionism, Freud reads a complex tale which is ultimately expressive of the simple aim of wish fulfilment. Wish fulfilment wrapped around the Oedipal triangle which places the child at the lower apex in a position that, as the fantasy shows, one may struggle to accommodate substitution. Because the child, unlike the mother or father, is always potentially plural, the security of their place in the family is endangered by the realisation that it might be occupied by another. As Krauss has suggested, the usefulness of the beating fantasy for the many thinkers who have found it such a productive text in part derives from the way that it is ‘everywhere filled with this logic of ‘but also’’. Opposing binary choices,

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
It is important to note that, strictly speaking, the schema sketched here is of the girl’s beating fantasy. The variation in the boy’s fantasy consists of the father figure being replaced by a mother figure in the first phase and, in the second, an ability to retrieve the scene which can only be ‘a construction of analysis’ for girls.
this ‘but also’ contrasts with the ‘either-or’ imperative that appears so frequently on the cusp of neuroses and so ‘this wild ambivalence, this simultaneous holding of two contradictory positions’ (which we may directly refer to the fantasy’s spatial, temporal and instinctual dimensions), also gestures in the direction from which Mitchell advances her own revision of the story in Chapter 4 of *Siblings*.\(^{53}\) Recognising at the outset that what Freud is describing here is a hysterical fantasy, Mitchell’s telling offers an alternative emphasis:

> It goes like this. The first stage involves the eradication of the other. The middle stage is the eradication of the ego as a prelude to auto-erotic orgasm. The boy’s masculine ego vanishes into his feminine position. For girls the annihilated ego is psychically absent and thus irretrievable. The third stage sees to the diffusion of the first stage of one ‘other’ into a number of others. However, these ‘others’ also have no particular characteristics of their own; they all stand for the auto-erotic subject.\(^{54}\)

Mitchell’s formulation is achieved via a reorientation of the vertical Oedipal axis but it is a rotation which stems from a similar premise to that which occupies Freud. For Freud the repression of Oedipal fantasies provide the terms of psychic conflict from which hysteria erupts. Mitchell too starts from hysteria but, through the sibling theory, replaces the Oedipal perspective by which Freud and later analysts understood the narrative as an expression of sibling rivalry for the exclusive love of the parent of the opposite sex. In its place, the role of siblings is granted a leading significance more in keeping with the fantasy’s narrative, a significance which is otherwise relegated or missed.\(^{55}\) Asserting the crucial ‘fact that the fantasist does not occupy one position only: as in a dream, she or he inhabits


\(^{54}\) Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 104.

\(^{55}\) It is not so much that Freud refuses to see siblings, rather that their rivalry cannot establish an autonomy whilst subordinate to an absolute paternal authority. With the father on the scene, all struggles for position are oriented vertically and the momentous significance of the threat carried by the sibling to extirpate one’s position cannot be recognized.
all the characters, is beater and beaten’, Mitchell directs our attention to a fundamental characteristic of the story, that the place of the sibling is in constant threat of displacement by not just one substitute but by a mass of substitutes.\textsuperscript{56} This motif of substitution, in the slippage through the stages, in the carousel of characters who are constantly exchanging places and, most explicitly, in the final scene in which a host of anonymous children ‘not personally known’ are being beaten, is essential to the oscillation between sameness and difference as the pivot on which Mitchell’s theory of sibling relations rests. To account for male hysteria the pathology must be given a place in universal experience, such as the trauma of displacement by a sibling. For the child of two or three years old the expected imminent arrival of a sibling carries an existential threat, depriving the child of its unique subject position within the family unit.\textsuperscript{57} Hysteria describes this threat of place-lessness. The problem is one of recognition, of recognising the ‘difference in sameness’ by which, because the sibling will occupy the same position, the infant subject must forge the differences out of this sameness which will allow seriality to then unfold. Resolution of the sibling experience, the way out of hysteria, depends on this recognition and the ability to use the sibling as a template for subsequent lateral relations by which the violence and sexuality the child directs toward the sibling is displaced onto substitutes outside of the family.

Mitchell begins and ends her chapter on this fantasy with the phrase ‘looking sideways’, a direction of the gaze deployed to both register her departure from the Oedipal doxa and to signal the presence of another on the lateral axis of whom we must be aware. The injunction is to look both ways, to find a productive reciprocity in being placed side by side and therefore to acknowledge the influence of lateral relations on the development of sexuality. Her reading of the beating fantasy provides a starting point for the sibling theory to address the ways in which \textit{Still Life} stages infantile

\textsuperscript{56} Mitchell, \textit{Siblings}, p. 105.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., pp. 132-133. See also Mitchell, ‘From Infant to Child: The Sibling Trauma, the \textit{Rite de Passage}, and the Construction of the “Other” in the Social Group’, \textit{fort/da}, 12 (2006), 35-49 (p. 40).
sexuality crossing over to the realm of subcultural peer groups and, perhaps, further toward positing the ways in which technologies provide new covers for both expressing and disguising fantasies arising from psychic events which inhere in siblinghood.

As Andre Green has written of Freud’s ‘fundamental text’, ‘force and meaning are indissociable’ in *A Child is Being Beaten*.58 To borrow from the language of dream-work, Mitchell’s revision endows a displacement with the conditions of its representation; which is to say, it gives pictorial form to a desire to murder that erupts from the threat of being replaced.59 The meaning of the fantasy, to use Green’s formulation, thus reveals the force of this trauma. For Mitchell the beating must be understood to articulate the desire to annihilate the intruding other, a force whose intensity derives from and mirrors the threat that other is perceived to hold. The stakes could not be higher and yet, such is the struggle to differentiate between oneself and the new arrival – an arrival who is to occupy the same apex of the family triangle, that position by which the subject orients all relations to self and others – the ‘you’ is liable to collapse into a ‘we’ as we see in the third stage of the fantasy. It is because ‘at the level we are addressing, sisters and brothers are the same’, with ‘narcissistic love [underlying] the thought of reduplication’, that the sequencing of sadism and masochism which marks each stage of the fantasy are held so tightly together.60 As such, the eradication of the ego and the eradication of the other are essential preludes to the satisfaction of the autoerotic subject unable to negotiate difference in sameness, for whom the subsequent anonymous others of the third stage are nothing more than duplicate stand-ins.61

Importantly, Mitchell’s focus on the ‘diffusion’ of one into many in the third stage offers a framework for how we might consider the theme of

61 Ibid.
anonymity that Rafman presents in *Still Life*. In the video anonymity is often evoked almost as a precondition for play and for punishment – as that which licenses *Still Life*’s many erotic and violent games. Locked into the rules of these games, anonymity links the temporary eradication of a specific identity to pleasures appealing to motifs which point directly to regressive infantile desires. Masks and furry suits, whatever else they signify – and many roleplaying subcultures develop highly sophisticated and nuanced systems of character development and personalisation – nevertheless represent a concealment within which lies their appeal as a masquerade by which to shuttle between subject positions and defy barriers of difference. Identity on this score is arranged by type, by group.

Facilitating subjective mobility, switching between fluid identities, was once celebrated as one of the Web’s most revolutionary affordances. 62 However, whilst providing a theoretical ground for how such tropes reflect a reality of universal psychic experience, psychoanalysis also warns that moving too freely between subject positions may come at a cost. The relationship between the sibling scenario and hysteria illustrates the stakes. For, whilst brothers and sisters provide, by virtue of sharing the same tip of the family triangle, the first others whose position we might occupy – and confuse with our own – stepping into another’s shoes can be a precarious affair. If we are not careful, we become too empty or too full of ourselves, as Mitchell observes of the hysteric who cannot endure his ambivalence. In such situations it becomes harder to recognise oneself in another. The individuality of others is lost as they are devalued in relation to the self who is insisting upon recognition as a unique subject. Violent and sexual impulses, always already in attendance, are structural to this confusion and, on the scenes of Rafman’s video, prompt the question of how we might account for all those anime bodies melting in the swimming pool (figure 2.5). As they congeal into a gloop these bodies, already made general by a highly schematic genre of representation in which the ideal image of women (anime’s infantilized masks) tolerates the bare minimum of difference, cease

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62 I return to this theme in Chapter 2.
being human at all. They, very literally, lose their outlines, becoming formless. The scene dramatizes the journey from individual subject to other to not even human that Mitchell’s re-reading of the beating fantasy through siblings tracks. Thus, the mode of representation that pictures these bodies might suggest not only the imprint of a repressed fantasy but an expedient visual schema for accommodating its restaging or reanimation. Even the rooms in which Still Life’s later performances of young girls in anime masks are staged serve to emphasise the eradication of specificity, each of these taking place in a corner of what appears to be unoccupied office space, settings which could scarcely be more anonymous.

Mitchell’s sibling model situates the negotiation of differences which structure groups under the sign of hysteria. Negotiations of this kind, which include the lateral differences of gender, race and class, are engaged on pain of a pathology that disturbs ‘how the subject sees himself in the world’. In the grip of hysteria the subject is adrift, everywhere and nowhere, everyone and no-one. Dreams, however, provide a space in which we may more safely experiment with inhabiting alternative subject positions. Freud’s famous dream of Irma’s injection scripts the master interpreter cornering several positions at once – subject, object and audience of the dream, he is both dreamer and dreamt of, analyst and analysand. Like fantasies, dreams accommodate such multiple occupancies. In the negotiations between fantasy and reality however, the sibling has to resolve the narcissistically shattering arrival of another who disabuses the subject of his uniqueness. This first lateral other is like but not the same as the subject. The dynamics of the negotiations this sibling complex entails are marked by a tension that is crucial for the transpositions of the beating fantasy and the peculiar character with which autoeroticism is made social through the progression of its scenes. The mutability of subject positions in A Child is Being Beaten describes the subject’s mounting realisation of there being not just more

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63 Mitchell, Siblings, p. 84.
than one, but more than two possible intruders. These imagined usurpers break the infant’s sense of security as to its place in the world and supply targets for channelling autoerotic and destructive impulses outward. They are ‘not personally known’. They have not, like the bear, the fox, the young women wearing anime masks, been finessed into complex individuals that could be granted subject-hood. Instead they stand void of any definitive features beyond the mark of other.

This hysterical mode of apprehending the group perceives difference exempt of granularity, it cannot apprehend individualising features or interior gradient. As Freud explains in Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming, working through these problems is part of what the world-making activities of play provide for socialisation. Three years after the publication of A Child is Being Beaten, Anna Freud, who was one of the little girls on whom her father based his observations in the latter, brought the two texts together in her 1922 essay Beating Fantasies and Daydreams. Unsurprisingly, hysteria is present as a theme from the outset yet Anna Freud’s task with this paper is to demonstrate the overcoming of the neuroses through art, a process of sublimation and mastery which extends her father’s convictions on the origins of creativity.

Beating Fantasies and Daydreams records the case of a fifteen-year-old girl who could not accept the connection between her textbook beating fantasy and an elaborately constructed set of daydreams which had subsequently been cultivated to replace it. Anna Freud aimed to demonstrate the extent to which the ‘artistic superstructure of daydreams’ is also constructed on this fantasy and frequently used to conceal it. The sexual and violent content of the fantasy is thereby sublimated into ‘nice stories’ which reveal the way in

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65 In regard to my earlier reference to Irma’s dream, dreamt whilst Martha Freud was pregnant with this their sixth child, Anzieu has noted how Anna, who shares her name with Irma (real name Anna Lictheim), was so called as ‘the name would symbolize the first major discovery – that of the meaning of dreams – made by her father with the help of the Anna – Irma figure’. Anzieu, Freud’s Self Analysis, p. 148.

which we all, as Jean-Paul Sartre said of Jean Genet, ‘awake without ceasing to dream’. Sartre’s argument claimed that Genet’s writing was a form of onanistic narcissism and that the words themselves ‘finished the job’. For the adolescent girl in Anna Freud’s paper too, the words in these stories are sexually satisfying in themselves. Yet Mitchell contends this would ‘indicate the presence of a neurotic symptom’ inconsistent with the younger Freud’s conclusion that the nice stories are the product of sublimation by which the sexual content of the fantasy has been worked through and transformed into an artistic enterprise. Rather, the fantasy is converted into nice stories which, by Mitchell’s view, ‘apparently, but only apparently, contain care and affection’. Mitchell’s divergence from Anna Freud on this point owes to her insistence that a fantasy can only be considered sublimated if it is relinquished after a recognition of its wish-fulfilling elements, a process that cannot be said to have been achieved if the story retains its capacity to stimulate pleasure whether through masturbation or in fantastical daydreams.

Mitchell leverages this disagreement to underscore her contention that if, as Freud claims, variations on A Child is Being Beaten are experienced universally then, as a hysterical fantasy, it must point out the potential hysterical in all of us. For Freud the fantasy is, like the ‘specimen dream’ of Irma’s injection, representative of psychic processes which reveal unconscious structures giving shape to the process of subject formation. The question prompted by Mitchell’s disagreement with Anna Freud therefore rests not so much on the origins of creative thinking in fantasy, hysterical or otherwise, but the extent to which hysteria may be sublimated into art and thus the extent to which hysteria remains present as a psychopathology of everyday life. But it is in regard to the more specific material Anna Freud is discussing that I would like to introduce this disagreement to the cast of non-human characters in Still Life such as the furry fandom players, the

68 Ibid., p. 450.
69 Mitchell, Siblings, p. 86.
70 Ibid., p. 86.
yiffing scenes, the unicorn and the dog-women strung on a gibbet. The girl in Anna Freud’s consulting room constructs the kind of stories common to young children – although an adolescent she has retained the same fantasy since at least ‘her fifth or sixth year’. In such tales we might imagine that animals, taking their cue from toys, assume the role of playmates and, like siblings, form the ranks of conspirators and adventurers who range across the expansive horizons of the child’s imagination. When we look at Rafman’s furry fandom players in particular, the costumes are clearly modelled less to resemble any species of animal than to resemble the anthropomorphised version of these creatures found in the bedrooms of young children. This, it seems reasonable to suggest, is a crucial component of their appeal. Indeed, each furry clip shows some ostensibly passive or comforting act – bouncing, crawling, or in the last, sinking. Even when sexual play or violence is directly introduced to non-human actors – via the priapic rabbit, the girl kissing a green unicorn (figure 2.7), the executed dogs – it is both undercover of representational distance (as in a cartoon) and traded on an appeal to the tropes of childhood. Regression from adulthood – adulthood is retained as a point of departure so as to emphasise the infantile – is presented in *Still Life*, like anonymity, as a condition of satisfaction.

Reflecting on the universality of the beating fantasy, Mitchell notes how ‘the most important point’ is ‘that as the fantasist grows up, the child being beaten remains a child. It would seem that there is no mileage to be gained in imagining an adult being beaten’. Thus in the magical worlds Anna Freud’s patient and Rafman’s furries entertain, the apparent diversity of characters merely serves to screen a fantasy that is both less obscure and more troubling than it might appear. A refusal to give up these characters and the stories they inhabit would indicate that the fantasy they were constructed to conceal retains its erotic power and passion for violence, that it has only apparently been sublimated. From here, *Still Life’s* menagerys

71 Anna Freud, p.138.
can be read as animations of the beating fantasy at work. The slippage
between the superficial innocence of furry fandom and the bizarre eroticism
of ‘yiffing’, between the nice story and the sex and violence of *A Child is
Being Beaten*, indicating the psychic trace of a core fantasy the subculture,
like the daydream, labours to conceal.

For Anna Freud’s young patient, each episode of the stories she created
would reach a point of climactic tension that diffused into a feeling of
happiness.73 Although, as a substitute for the orgasm brought about from
masturbation to the shameful beating fantasy, the stories were not always
infallible, the narrative structure of the daydreams still served to underscore
her father’s insistence that fantasy is a mode of creative thinking dominated
by the pleasure principle. Accordingly, the ‘one invariance’ in the beating
fantasy, writes Krauss, is ‘the rhythm of its particular action. That action is
‘to beat’ and it is this pulse that remains unchanged’.74 The rhythm of the
pulse underlies all the contents of *A Child is Being Beaten*; ‘it is this form
that works to secure the identity of the fantasy such that in each of its
obsessional repetitions it will always return the same’.75 The pulse, for
Krauss, is that which both holds together and fragments the gestalt; it is the
agency that ‘will allow the erotic currents of the dream to surface’.76
Mitchell, on the other hand, reminds us ‘that the hypothesised core physical
sensation is the pulse-beat of the excited clitoris or penis. From this
sensation, or to produce this sensation, the person masturbating elaborates
beating fantasies, using, I believe, beating scenes (real or imagined) with
rivalled siblings’.77 As both Krauss and Mitchell show, this pulse-beat
endows the fantasy with a rhythmic structure that, extending from the
physiological, serves as something of a support for the pictorial scenes
which are summoned up. Rafman’s video makes use of a similar non-visual
support by way of a soundtrack by his collaborator Daniel Lopatin

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73 Anna Freud, p. 147.
74 Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, p. 221.
75 Ibid., p. 221.
76 Ibid., p. 209.
77 Mitchell, *Siblings*, pp. 104-105
(otherwise known as the DJ Oneohtrix Point Never). The music is almost entirely constructed of alternating sonic pulses and waves that punctuate the video’s transitions. Yet there is no swelling climax here – nothing that would suggest of itself the steady build and release of orgasm – Lopatin’s soundtrack is for a more prosaic, weary or numb form of masturbation, carried out in the vague hope of sating some not quite conscious urge.

As the grainy photograph of a man holding guns to his head reminds us, if it were necessary, the aftermath of masturbating in both the beating fantasy and the video, is guilt – a feeling that will be ‘more strongly excited’, Sigmund Freud observes at the beginning of A Child is Being Beaten, in cases in which this core fantasy takes on the characteristics of an obsession. The image of a man with pants around his head may also suggest that there is something in this beat that goes beyond pleasure. Masud Khan, a protégé of Anna Freud, wrote of the ‘illusion of omnipotent control’ residing in the fetishist’s desire for mastery over ‘magical objects’, the kind of control to which the casual and arbitrary power to make fantastical erotic bodies appear and disappear, transform and mutate at will just by a few clicks might appeal. Mastery in this tableau, the one summoned by the betamale and the monstrous pattern of incel violence that has left so many disobliging women dead, may be figured as compulsive in such a way that drives inexorably towards death. The rhythm of the beat in this sense is resistant to the capture of pleasure. For Krauss, this is certainly the economy of the drives that the pulse indexes – each recurrence in the beat is experienced as a rupture, ‘the discontinuity without end that is death’.

The sex that summons the pulse is just as surely countervailed by the death drive. Two particular scenes in Still Life register with florid theatricality the weave of sexuality and death. The first is the second hanging scene, featuring those highly sexualised and anthropomorphic dogs...
in Day-Glo hues strung up for the transgression (figure 2.8), or so we might venture, of desire cutting across proscribed categories. And yet, such is the overt gendering of these animals, the scene seems to pervert Oedipal dynamics in which, Freud and Lacan maintain, the unconscious finds its only means of symbolically representing death. Castration – a threat directed to the masculine subject – is also allegorised in *Still Life* through the slow defenestration of the flailing fox, a creature whose phallic bearing shrinks slowly and pathetically into the mud.

One of the many productive aspects of Mitchell’s theory is that it allows for an additional psychic representation of death in which death or annihilation is figured by the sibling’s threat of displacement and the complete effacement of one’s subject position. By this intervention Mitchell gives a framework for apprehending death in sexual contents that arise from relationships on the lateral axis that I would now like to hold in mind. For whilst Khan argued passionately and persuasively for the complexity of the therapeutic function of perversions, on the subject of pornography he was far more unequivocal, attacking its cultivation of depersonalisation, dissociation and violence.\(^2\) I would suggest Khan’s stance gestures at a too dangerous correspondence between pornography and infantile sexuality that risks reinforcing the former’s most dangerous and unreformed impulses, that, in other words, distributes regression as a dominant mode of adult sexual relations. Whatever one thinks of this position, it occurs to me that what Khan is worrying about, beyond bourgeois morality, is based on a recognition of the power of infantile sexuality and its intimacy with violence. The basis of this relation to pornography would be found in a preference for stasis, a regressive pull that derives its strength from a wellspring of infantile sexuality. Hence why it is Khan’s observation that pornography’s ‘time is the perpetual and static present’, and that therefore it possesses a distinctly ‘nostalgic atmosphere’, which is worth considering in relation to the function of technological devices in the video.\(^3\)

\(^2\) Khan, pp. 219-226.
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 222.
What the origin of the beating fantasy in childhood helps us to see in Rafman’s work is the way that, from the very title onwards, the anachronistic technologies pictured in Still Life – outmoded CGI, heavily pixelated graphics, games consoles from the 1990s – are positioned as always looking backwards, animating and bringing to life fantasies of, and for, the past. Whatever their forward thrust may have once been, these technologies are presented as tools which can only access desire in reverse, devices of regression as much as progression, collectors of the past’s residues. The performers in anime masks, beyond their pitch to the uncanny, are afforded a spectral quality as the traces of their movements are caught in slow motion. This is perhaps close to what Rafman has in mind when he talks of his interest in how ‘technology in its broadest sense […] changes the way in which we remember […] changes the way we actually conceive of the past’. If, for Freud, desire in fantasy is always nostalgic owing to the prohibition on incest encountered in infancy, Still Life would seem to propose a set of devices appropriate for its expression; appropriate at least for a particular subject who may be fixed and formed by his, and in this case it is a ‘his’, memories and manipulations of these machines. These are, then, nostalgic devices by which to access nostalgic desire. In other words, something of a dream media that instates the dialectic between novelty and obsolescence within the oneiric analogy of dreams as apparatus by which we revisit the psychic territories of yesterday. It is as though a certain constellation of visual and information technologies, clustered around the graphical user interface as a site of mastery profoundly geared toward the slippage between fantasy and reality, serve as repositories for past desires and as such, like dreams, offer a vehicle for their re-mediation.

As a genre of media whose obsolescence is pre-programmed, consumer computing technology provides an array of felicitous screens on which to render the ‘shadow show’ cast in the psychical space of dreams. The voice

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84 Rafman and McCarthy, ‘Interview’, p. 120.
over in *Still Life* incants that we are indeed ‘again in a dream’ (03:41), that ‘the images captivate you, but you still drift off’ (01:10). We ‘can still see every detail clearly but can’t grasp the meaning’ (01:17). The direction of travel is made clear, we are moving back to ‘the womb, the original site of the imagination’ (00:36), a point of eternal return before one is dethroned and displaced by the intrusion of another. As with the other works in this series, the ‘dream fragments’, as Rafman calls them, are dredged from the ‘deep internet’ from whose murky depths they draw some kind of psychic authenticity.\textsuperscript{86} Often the clips of costumed performers are inlaid against a highly stylised and non-descript backdrop taken from some animation or other and from which they seem to float hypnotically toward the viewer, as if to emphasise their origin in a world that will remain alien and exotic (figures 2.6 and 2.9). What the exchange between footage of ‘real’ performances and animations seems to be pushing against is any meaningful distinction between the two ‘categories’ of content. The footage of fetishists performing to webcams is digitally captured and compressed into a standard file format which can be trafficked across the network before being opened by another user. The bodies extracted from the file are received as bits of information, modulated into objects remotely generated and all the more remote for it. Wrenched from their ground (another displacement), a sense of shared material distinction or analogical relation is subsumed by the subjective workings of fantasy. Symptomatic of what has been understood as digital image production’s attack on the authority of the referent, the proximity of cartoon violence to the threat of physical violence in *Still Life* points to the dangers of dismantling in their entirety the conceptual borders between media as technologies that each carry an evolving set of challenges to representational systems in the context of fantasy.\textsuperscript{87}


\textsuperscript{87} On this theme, David Joselit has recently written of ‘remediation’ as a ‘contemporary form of universalism’. In ‘our contemporary information economy […] virtually any object may be rendered digitally and, conversely, any digital file may assume myriad alternate states’. David Joselit, ‘Rachel Harrison, Untranslatable’, in *Rachel Harrison: Life Hack*, ed. by Joselit and Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 251-260 (pp. 251-252). See also Cadence Kinsey, ‘From Post-media to post-medium’, in
In considering how we might assess the ways such conditions play into Rafman’s use of these media’s ‘negative capability’, I want to turn finally to two images. Together they speak to the peculiar stance Rafman strikes, both here and elsewhere in his practice, as a quasi-anthropologist of the deep Web. The posture is not uncommon to artists ‘post-internet’ whose work displaces online exotica into the museum space, yet it bears pertinently on the modes of identification this video in particular brings into question.

The first image is by now familiar. We are initially introduced to the man with two guns pointing at his head at the opening of Still Life. However Rafman forces us to revisit this character throughout by inserting the image ten or eleven times between the beginning and the end of the video, providing it with a ground – the video as a discursive object of art – that overlays, obscures and mystifies the context in which it was first posted to the internet and the specific situation in which it was produced. In the absence of that information, the door to morbid conjecture is opened at the artist’s direction. Rafman retains control of what inferences may be drawn and so sets the parameters of any speculative narratives in which the viewer may choose to insert the image and its protagonist; What act has preceded this image and what will happen next? Despite its ostensible portraiture, Rafman’s use of the image as an emblem of and for the video encourages us to consider it the titular reference. Throughout most of this discussion I have abbreviated the title of the work to Still Life, leaving aside the parenthetical (Betamale) which stands after and behind it. However, this still life, which we must surely read as an archetype of both representation and subject, figure and ground, compels us to consider where this character should be positioned within the sex-and-violence fantasies that the film surveys. He is both addressed by the film, most explicitly in the voice-over directed at a ‘you’, and the supposed author of the fantasies; a figure of masculinity standing in for a subject position and a subculture tethered to the

substitution of embodied objects of desire with online proxies and fantasies which imaginatively diversify archaic tropes of domination and submission in novel dress. And yet, in this Sadean pose, the betamale is also the receiver of his own violence, ‘both executioner and victim’.

The second image (figure 2.11) is taken from the homepage of Rafman’s website. After watching Still Life, the first thing we notice about it is the strong resemblance to the images of troll caves that succeed what I am taking to be the video’s eponymous image. The same kind of jumble of devices is arrayed and whilst the scene suggests a space of more active work — there are DIY tools, only one beer bottle, even some cleaning products — everything appears oriented above all toward the screen in a manner which might, if it were not for Rafman’s own framing of such spaces in Still Life, be unremarkable. Yet watching the video changes how we read this image. It re-produces this atelier shot — a genre of images which both artists and art historians have historically been happy to load with tacit suggestion as to how an artist’s mind works, a self-portrait, if you like, of their practice — as a kind of negative of the one showing a man with pants on his head and guns at his temples. The relation between the artist and the betamale this second image establishes recalls the method of display that Rafman uses to show his works in galleries, whereby one is encouraged to step into a space and be entertained by a projection of desires safely categorised as alien to one’s experience. The psychoanalytic definition of projection however, according to Laplanche and Pontalis, describes an operation ‘whereby qualities, feelings, wishes, or even objects, which the subject refuses to recognise or rejects in himself, are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing’.

Projection, in this sense, is a way of deflecting a confrontation with those parts of the self one rejects. The thought prompted by the bringing together of these two images is whether projection in this instance seeks to conceal the way that, to borrow from Krauss, the artist

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88 Bersani and Dutoit, p.7.
89 Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 349.
absorbed in this material may be ‘caught up in a cat’s cradle of identification with what he sees’.

In Mitchell’s summary of the chapter ‘A Child is Being Beaten’, she describes sibling sexuality – pre-Oedipal sexuality – as, like pornography, more concerned with the availability of multiple subject positions than with reproduction. This lateral sexuality, unfixed from the binaries of sexual difference, is crucial for illustrating the condensations, revisions and displacements I suggest we might find in Rafman’s still life. Oneiric mechanisms entail a set of coercive identifications and alienations which recast the viewer as a voyeur at the scene of fantasy. In one of only two passing references to the Internet in Siblings, Mitchell expresses her doubt that a user is vying only for parental attention when they look for violent and sexual masturbation fantasies online. Later on in her discussion of the beating fantasy, this suggestion is developed by way of a striking conclusion which stems from the observation that it is because the fantasised beaten child never grows up that it is probable the fantasy originates in childhood. In light of this, child pornography is particularly dangerous ‘precisely because it uses actuality for what should be kept as fantasy’:

If we all have somewhere a version of the fantasy ‘a child is being beaten’ emanating from the sex-and-violence excitement of our childhood sibling and peer histories interlocking with our physiological stimulation, then it is this very fantasy that is being appealed to in child pornography. Because the pornographer uses actuality, there is a danger that the viewer could also slip between fantasy and reality.

92 Mitchell, *Siblings*, p. 89.
93 Ibid., p. 105.
Here we seem to be approaching what might be at stake in the tropes of a subculture for which identification and belonging is premised on a sexuality left to unfurl in digital seclusion. The costs of which have been made painfully visible from the vantage point of our present moment. In a very different moment of seclusion – one both clinical and bourgeois – psychoanalysis was first grasped by Freud’s transposition, from reality to fantasy, of a scene of child sexual abuse through which, via the abandonment of the seduction theory, infantile sexuality emerged. Just over a century later Mitchell’s warning of a universal fantasy lodged in infantile sexuality, from which it cannot wriggle free, meets with a technology that corrodes the shared reality by which ‘actuality’ is upheld. The fantasy is, in this respect, memetic, in that it endlessly replicates variants of itself. Such a development is on the one hand testament to the thin line dividing these two dimensions of experience yet, on the other, the absolute dissolution of this partition also leaves one vulnerable to an incarceration that entails in a flight from reality, to be, as Donald Winnicott put it, ‘locked in the fixity of fantasying’. If, as Khan once remarked, ‘pornography is the stealer of dreams’ then What residues of daily alienation does it turn back into actuality in the case of self-identifying betamales? As a ‘static enclave’, an ur-pornography, in which, like Peter Pan, one never grows up, A Child is Being Beaten establishes the wish to annihilate at the base of fantasy, that is, at the base of a mode of thinking from which action and its creative or destructive impulse springs. That the betamale and his media do not, or cannot, sublimate the fantasy leads back not just to this annihilatory wish and its infirm containment in fantasy but to the infirm containment of fantasy itself.

94 It is a notable ‘universal’ of chan sites that child pornography and ‘loli’ are persistent on all geo-regional iterations and variations of 4chan.
95 Laplanche and Pontalis, pp. 404-407.
97 Khan, p. 222.
From one betamale to another…

In the version shared by Republican nominee Donald J. Trump (figure 2.12), three thick red stripes bellow gently. The soft diagonal shading which elaborates the slight curvature of these broad horizontals is the only gesture the image makes of depth. The rest of the picture is inscrutably flat, comprised of full black lines filled on either side with block colours. Appearing on the future President’s Twitter account, as a retweet from @realDonaldTrump, it emanates a certain polished sheen at odds with the rough and ready stylistic preferences of most image board memes, a better fit, then, for the slick aesthetics of the Web 2.0 platforms it has infiltrated and on which it has thrived. In fact, the provenance of this meme’s production can be readily demonstrated by one of the many alt-right meme production video guides which tutor their viewers through basic image editing software whose standardised colour palettes have turned the President’s hair an unusual yellow. Beneath the trademark coiffure, one eyebrow is raised above an impossibly wide mouth that stretches puckered and crumpled across a mutant puss. The green skin, the mischievous squint, the smirk, the claws gripping the presidential podium and the deliberative poke of the chin press into the generously stylized silhouette of presidential office, gesticulating the alt-right’s self-congratulatory and incredulous declaration that they ‘have actually elected a meme’.

Pepe the Frog, designated as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League in September 2016, began his fictional existence as a character in the illustrator Matt Furie’s comic, Boy’s Club. A central protagonist in what the publisher of Boy’s Club describes as ‘a stoner classic for the Tumblr

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98 As Phillips explains in This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things, 4chan users consider the site to be the origin of meme-making. Memes which betray the production values of meme template platforms are derided amongst its users as inauthentic appropriations of 4chan’s subculture. See Phillips, This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things, pp.137-152.

99 Whilst Trump posted the image in October 2015, more than a year before his election, it is surely this image that the anonymous user on 4chan’s /pol/ board, quoted in Hope Not Hate’s report on the alt-right, has in mind. See Lawrence, Mulhall and Murdoch, p.47.

100 Furie disowned the character following its appropriation and killed off Pepe in a single page comic strip published in May 2017.
generation’, Pepe is someone bad things happen to.101 The butt even of his own jokes, Nagle has noted how ‘in his original cartoon form, Pepe was a sad sack, prone to bouts of humiliation’ and thus an ideal mascot for self-identifying betamales.102 Fittingly, then, in the zoological taxonomy of The Interpretation of Dreams Freud categorises small animals such as frogs as ‘substitutes for little children, e.g. undesired sisters or brothers’.103 Via such animals Freud places siblings directly in the category of vermin, a term of political rhetoric which has long been used to summon fantasies of outgroups that must be destroyed.104 Rhetoric that, in effect, turns people into animals.105 Mitchell takes up this conflation at the level of the group and its susceptibility to the ‘delusion’ drawn from the sibling experience that ‘some people are not human – they are not just like vermin, they actually are vermin and are experienced as such’.106 The association is prefigured in the primal sibling encounter with the undesired sister or brother who, upon arrival, is understood precisely as a human animal, ‘sweet and cuddly’ but also ‘dirty and ill-smelling’ and which, like an animal, can be both loved and hated but cannot lay claim to being ‘a social person’.107 If they were a social person, rather than being, in Mitchell’s terms, selected as ‘not a brother’, they would gain admittance into the fratriarchy and enjoy all the rights and benefits that flow from membership of the ‘brotherhood of man’. As it is, however, the frog remains the unloved pre-social sibling, ever an avatar for exclusion.108

102 Nagle, ‘The New Man of 4chan’. As the recent Feels Good Man documentary feature on Furie’s creation implies, the character is also something of an avatar for its creator to whom Pepe bears a striking physiognomic resemblance.
103 Freud, ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’, p. 236. From hereon ‘Freud’ should be taken to refer to Sigmund unless otherwise noted.
104 Frantz Fanon, in 1963, confirmed the racial dimension of this vocabulary: ‘the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man’s reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations’. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 42.
107 Ibid., p. 40.
108 The point is worth making in relation to how Pepe might be understood as an avatar in the context of online protest. At first blush Pepe may share some similar features of the protest avatars of 2011, which the sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo recognizes as symbolic vessels of projection equipped with a memetic quality that affords participation in an online
It would follow, then, that some marvellous transformation would be required to endow this frog with the trappings of office the meme effects. One reason why Pepe-Trump is perhaps the most ‘worked-over’ of alt-right memes may be because of the simplicity with which it represents a collective and otherwise dispersed satisfaction. The meme immediately calls to mind two key terms of dream-work. First, Pepe-Trump provides an example of condensation which is performed as an act of wish fulfilment, neatly represented by the phrase ‘we elected a meme’. Exemplary in its concision, the meme very usefully ties together what a number of other disparate memes articulate, which is another way of saying that it binds or revises the political speech of those memes into a single utterance. Fragments of speech, residues, thoughts and desires are thus cohered into the unity of a whole image, a weirdly streamlined and, indeed, single, representative figure. In its coherence, both symbolic and figurative, the meme accommodates the dimension of fantasy and dreams in which one can and does occupy several positions at once, translating this general characteristic of the unconscious into a specific fantasy represented by the occupancy of a singular position. Thus Pepe-Trump ties the libidinal to the official, the authority of the state to the state of fantasy; it licenses the abrogation of reality.

Such conjuring tricks are characteristic of Pepe’s memetic ascriptions. The alt-right has cultivated an ironic occultist mysticism around the frog that casts him as a pseudo spiritual-political leader through whom memes are endowed with the totemistic associations of animism and omnipotence.109

crowd and collective ‘sense of self’. The protest avatar thereby ‘reversing the experience of individualization’ online and working to facilitate a ‘choreography of assembly’ as a form of ‘emotional scene-setting’. The distinction I want to claim here is that any inclusivity Pepe offers along this lines is a priori manifested under the sign of exclusion in such a way that the petition for representation is transformed into a plea for non-recognition of others. See Paolo Gerbaudo, ‘Protest avatars as memetic signifiers: political profile pictures and the construction of collective identity on social media in the 2011 protest wave’, Information, Communication & Society, 18 (2015), 916-929 (p. 927), and Gerbaudo, Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism (London: Pluto, 2012). 109 I refer to Pepe’s myriad relations to the fictitious religion-cum-territory Kek or Kekistan. ‘Kek’ is a word appropriated from the World of Warcraft computer games that evolved into an alt-right meme when the 4chan community discovered the Egyptian deity of the same
Cast as a body snatcher here and revelling in the full glare of global media attention, Pepe uses his pulpit to bewitch a captive audience. He stands in complete possession of both Trump and a public gullible enough to buy whatever trick he’s pulling. On this stage the candidate is pitched as a vessel, a brand, a mutable image for the amplification and dissemination of a momentarily unified message. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one can detect an echo in this strategy of a business plan that, through aggressively traded licensing deals, sees Trump Towers spring up in Indonesia and the president’s name pasted onto the packaging of steaks, bottle of vodka and perfume labels. The comparison reveals that aspect of memes in the service of accelerationist projects which imagine the movement and distribution of capital through biological metaphors; memes as loci where content may be laundered and exchanged or even pollinated, as sites where discrete but mutually affirming brands conjoin to boost market share in a crowded attention economy.

Yet, this latter observation has hit upon a second wish fulfilled by the meme. One that is drawn out from the relation between the content of the meme and its symbolic structure as a form of political speech; the ways in which what the meme says coheres with how it says it. Alt-right memewarriors are keen that their iterative manipulation of memetic form should be acknowledged, that we should recognise the different levels on which these memes speak. In this sense, Freud’s interpretative capture of dreams –

name was often depicted with the head of a frog and associated with chaos and darkness. Again, this mystic pose is apposite, Pepe’s enigmatic and encrypted characteristics are fully congruent with Freud’s depiction of dreams as ‘gateways into the world of mysticism’ and his book which interpreted them as his ‘Egyptian dream-book’. Freud, ‘6 August 1899’, in The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904, ed. by J. M. Masson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 366.

one that, as Pontalis puts it, refuses their ‘fascination’ and seeks to ‘dissipate the charms and mystery of oneiric life’ – falls just short of the ambition to resist critically if interpretation goes no further than deconstruction. Working out the mechanics of the image is not the same as uncovering its unconscious motivations. And so, to more effectively undo this meme’s work, we might instead look to the ambivalences residing in Pepe-Trump and the tensions that gather around this superimposition. For another way of seeing Pepe-Trump is to provisionally accept this reptilian conjugation and work from the premise that we are looking at a single figure but on the condition that this single figure, precisely because it is a unity (mèmes), also hides a split: a meme made of two ‘me’s’. A split that, for psychoanalysis, designates a psychotic, mad figure. Pepe in this guise, is Trump’s schizophrenic twin, casting his own madness as a cloak over the seam that stiches these selves together. For, if this is a single figure it is one divided by alter-egos which, whilst temporarily harmonised, are liable to work against each other. Dream thoughts are able to effect synthetic compositions beyond the power of waking life but under the pressure of reality fragments drift apart and fall into conflict.

Too small to pass legibly through Photoshop’s compression of the image file, ‘e pluribus unum’ waves on the banner aloft the eagle in the front centre of Pepe’s podium. The legend reads as a collective hallucination of unity that covers over a compulsion for internal division. The words hide an anxiety in the form of a wish; the fusion they promise betrays the psychic reality of social unbinding. And the social here is important not least because this is what the office in question proposes; the investiture in a single body of many others – the president is, constitutionally, peopled by her citizens. For the aetiology of such fantasies, Mitchell would turn to the sibling situation that models the group of which the nation is one privileged and formalised expression. The desire for, and frequent enactment of,

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113 Necessarily I am thinking of the nation here along Benedict Anderson’s terms – as a horizontal fratriarchy, an imagined community of brothers, rather than as a configuration of
incest between siblings is an echo of the subject’s autoeroticism that imagines the sister or brother as ‘more me’ in ‘a narcissistic economy in which the other is the self’. Yet, as Mitchell is at pains to insist, the sexual desire for fusion expressed by incest is accompanied, always and already, by the intensity of violence that springs from the same confusion. ‘Sibling incest’, she writes, ‘contains death’. Socialised by the group, this violence is turned outward and legitimated by the state. However, when the violence loses its object and goes astray, it may be directed inward, to the self and outward to the wider self that is the group, in the form of civil conflict:

The failure of repression or sublimation of murderousness, on an analogy with the failure of repression or sublimation of infantile sexuality, can be enacted in what I will call a violence-perversion, which is psychically structured like a sexual perversion […] We are all considered sexually ‘polymorphously perverse’ in infancy. As a species we are at least as violence promiscuous as we are sexual promiscuous.

For the way perversion combines sexuality with violence in this way, the betamale offers a ready figure. The image punctuating Rafman’s film shows a violence perversion which, having wreaked havoc outwardly, turns back on the self, returning from the social to the individual subject. The usefulness of Mitchell’s ‘violence-perversion’ here, above, say, masochism, is on account of it being plural and multivalent, capable of addressing a diversity of objects. In A Child is Being Beaten, the second child, the brother or sister to the dreaming subject, is the proper target for the desired beating, they are the beta who must be beaten. But what Mitchell’s revision

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114 Mitchell, Siblings, p. 111. The full passage reads: ‘brothers and sisters represent the minimal distance between people that must be preserved if incest is to be avoided […] the minimal difference of sibling relations, which themselves are only a shade away from a narcissistic economy in which the other is the self’.

115 Ibid., p. 81.

116 Ibid., p. 36.
calls into sharper focus is not only that the second child is the first child, along with all the other unknown children of the third stage, but that love and hate can easily be confused. As this double-sided president suggests, the father may purport to show his affection through terror.\(^{117}\) Mignon Nixon, in the wake of Trump’s victory, noted that the psychoanalysis of groups, particularly by Wilfred Bion, has shown how ‘the mad leader is a kind of baby king, an avatar of our infantile past’.\(^{118}\) His ‘grandiosity, impulsivity, and self-infatuation [...] revives atavistic memories of our own infantile rages, mania and megalomaniac ecstasies’ from which a receipt of pleasure may be yielded through ‘indulging the omnipotent fantasies of a helpless psychotic’.\(^{119}\) The conflation and confusion of genius and madness, Nixon contends, was central to Trump’s appeal as the ‘cleavage between what is deemed pathological in the individual and normative in the group was eroded and then erased’ during the autumn of 2016.\(^{120}\) Thus the wish to salve the hysterical fragments of a split and divided group is resolved through recourse to a hysterical solution.

I would wager that such a perplex of conflicting desires and anxieties are a good part of what the composite figure of Pepe-Trump aims to conceal. Indeed, we might consider along these lines that such is the concision of the meme it betrays the work of a secondary revision; that is, the trace of a thematic composition tying unfamiliar perceptual fragments and thoughts so neatly into a scene which covers for them, in this case organised around the ruse that ‘we actually elected a meme’. But revision, we remember, is a disguise, one which evokes the complex process by which the act of sharing a dream may be either, or perhaps both, a means of interpretation, of

\(^{117}\) As Green has written of the child’s desire in the beating fantasy: ‘The accumulation of failures by the ego, the search for unconscious sanctions (hospitalisations, confinements, handicapping medications, diverse intensive treatments) are above all evidence [...] of the intensity of the unconscious guilt which seeks punishment [...] The failures of the ego – fragmentation, splitting, hallucinatory attacks, etc. – are all part of the same mechanism: being beaten by the father’. Green, ‘The Death Drive: Meanings, objections, substitutes’, in Reading French Psychoanalysis, ed. by Dana Birkstead-Breen, Sara Flanders and Alain Gibeault (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 497-515 (p. 505).

\(^{118}\) Ibid., p. 9.

\(^{119}\) Ibid., p. 8.
disclosing its meanings, or hiding them from the self as much as others. Thinking Pepe-Trump as a veneer that screens a bundle of contradictions and conflicting subject positions compacted into a reductive visual language brings us closer to Apter’s grasping of memes as objects of ‘iconotropy’ – the mis/translation of icons across the epistemological borders of groups. The term appeals not just because of this meme’s overt iconicity – which, in turn, complicates the idea of the meme as a plural object, indicating both an image by which power and knowledge is effected through diffusion and multiplication as well as a type of auratic encounter with a still and unchanging image. As a group image that is at work for the group as a psychic as well as strategic entity, the misconception of Pepe is a component part of what Pepe memes are all about; the frog exemplifies a vernacular to the extent that it remains illegible to the uninitiated who are precisely intended to misread the symbolic content of Pepe.\(^{121}\) These memes espouse a mode of identification that is veiled by the image of President Trump. The latter supposes a ‘primal father’ and the libidinal investments that constitute fascist identification in the Freudian model. Contrastingly, the mode of identification which Pepe describes may be more accurately modelled on a horizontal scheme: as an ironic mascot, knowingly fictitious and absurd, Pepe undermines, even ridicules, the notion of a hierarchical group and is deployed to signal conversance in the codes of a subculture within which any member of the group is authorised to amend and evolve the group’s image.

In his short essay *Père Trump*, Foster casts Trump’s libidinal appeal to his supporters in precisely Freud’s terms, or at least those terms set out in *Totem and Taboo* and *Group Psychology*.\(^{122}\) Riffing, intentionally or

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\(^{121}\) The disastrous attack on Pepe by the Clinton campaign was an exemplary instance of this misreading.

\(^{122}\) Wary of ‘pathologizing anyone’, Foster nonetheless gives in to the comparison: ‘It may be difficult for people like us to see why [Trump was so widely supported], but one way is to suggest that he tapped into the “erotic tie” that binds the horde to the primal father. For this figure both embodies the law (he lords it over the brothers) and performs its transgression (he can grope any woman) […] And so we have a celebrity president (“When you’re a star . . . you can do anything”) as throwback primal father (or maybe just bully-in-chief), and there are legions of white guys who want to be his “apprentices.” ‘Père Trump’, p. 5.
otherwise on the almost homonym of Père-Pepe, his concern is what binds the group to the egocrat. Yet a more pertinent question here might depart from the opportunity Pepe-Trump offers for reflection on how psychic investments cohere memetic meaning to memetic form. One would need for this something like a specimen meme which facilitated the demonstration of an internal consistency by which latent meaning is composed through the relation at the meme’s surface between content and form, symbol and structure. Anzieu in his discussion of Irma’s injection shows how ‘the dream’s formal processes are, like its latent wishes, represented in its content’, asserting that this is the crucial revelation of Freud’s self-analysis as articulated through the dream’s interpretation.\(^{123}\) In answer to the question ‘do dreams have a meaning’ Anzieu ventriloquises Freud’s answer in the affirmative: ‘not only do dreams express the meaning of our wishes, but that meaning derives from their symbolic structure’.\(^{124}\) Recognising this support is precisely what Pontalis is urging when he spotlights the sheet of paper or cardboard required for the dream to take shape in space. In this instance, we might note that the dimensions of the meme’s space can be elaborated from the meme’s status as a site of projection and reflection. It operates to and from subjects and subject positions, it is in this respect constitutionally double sided. What it shows on the front it may hide at the back.

If thinking memes through dream-work engages a structure for apprehending their transmission of psychic meaning it also poses an implication between a formal and psychic economy. For example, displacements in both memes and dreams become meaningful through a recursive relationship to not only the associations they draw in but the frame – the dream or meme scene – in which those displacements are made visible. Thus, future mutations in or of a given scene depend on the associations already ascribed to certain features in the meme’s latent and surface content. But it is in the tension between these associations,

\(^{123}\) Anzieu, *Freud’s Self Analysis*, p. 150.

\(^{124}\) Ibid.
displacements, condensations and revisions and the memetic form that a composite and multivalent meaning emerges. As the taxonomies which populate the cataloguing website knowyourmeme.com demonstrate, looking past the vaunted diversity of memetic forms and formats one is confronted by a reliance on the template, the stock character and an archive of tropes. For all the tension between innovation and constraint, the mutation of memes – their work of difference and differing – cannot be read apart from the dependency on an associative chain which refers back to an archetype. The dynamic between the singular and the plural, the one and the many flows from their status as group images.\textsuperscript{125} I would like to suggest that it is this internal tension that constitutes the support memetic form provides. Coming back to Pepe-Trump, this support is metonymically figured in the evocation of a podium. The podium, or the office it evokes, functions as a synecdoche which supports the meme formally and figuratively, it is the constant on which the meanings of the meme, its political speech acts, are founded. Yet the podium also stands in contrast to the division of the figure, a move which threatens the integrity and coherence of the icon in whom the meme’s metonymic scheme is vested. Thus, the symbolic structure of the meme – the tension it articulates between the one and the many, the familiar and the novel – indeed finds representation, along with its latent wishes, through the surface content.

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\textsuperscript{125} Broadening this out, one could think here, with reference to the term’s etymological moorings and semantic structure (‘me’- ‘me’), of the relation between a given and family name as an axis between the family and the social. Somewhat divergently, but still on the line of ‘a family of images’, Forrester notes that Freud’s accumulations of antiques and texts (dreams, cases and jokes): ‘embodied at the same time the principle of the souvenir and of the collection, that is, both the aesthetic of origin and presence, of restoration and provenance, and the aesthetic of collection, accumulation, and exchange, with its indefinite seriality’. Forrester, p. 129.
Rene Kaës’ proposition of dream polyphony rests on the conception of spaces where dreams ‘interpenetrate’. ‘Dreams’, he writes, ‘are formed in relation to each other’ and their meaning depends on ‘the relations of reciprocal support’. These interdiscursive spaces (and given Kaës’ terminology, we may want to think of them as mediums) constitute the factories in which dreams are manufactured by the group and house the operations by which they may be made comprehensible. Earlier, I suggested the image board site 4chan (figure 2.14) as a place where this theory may be put to work. Modelled on the anime sharing site 2chan, 4chan was founded by the then fifteen-year-old American Christopher Poole in 2003. In as much as the site can be positioned as a site of encoding, of meme-work, it is crucial from a perspective that hopes to account for the psychic implications of memes as social images in which are carried fantasies of, and for, the group.

If we are concerned here with the group subjectivity of what Florian Cramer has called ‘the memetic alt-right’, 4chan is where its sensibility take shape. Cramer developed the specification through efforts to map the disparate positions the broader catch-all ‘alt-right’ encompasses. That would include, but not be limited to, the alt-lite, neoreactionaries, transhumanists, incels, identitarians, the many manosphere groups as well as white nationalists, anti-Semites, some Trump administration officials and Republican party activists. Despite the commonalities one can thread through these factions, their differences on a vast range of attitudes are significant and reach beyond the scope of this thesis. So, whilst the alt-right might loosely describe a mode of neo-fascist politics made common by a shared investment in online sociality, the distinction Cramer proposes refines the

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126 Kaës, p. 183.
127 In 2009 Poole was voted ‘World's Most Influential Person’ by *Time* in a poll widely recognised to have been hijacked by 4chan trolls. As I discuss in Chapter 2, 4chan’s bulletin board format and house style harks to the design features of early Web communities as well as the sensibility of cult shock sites such as somethingawful.com. See Nagle, ‘The Leaderless Digital Counterrevolution’, pp. 28-29.
group by describing a particular subcultural inflection that emerges from a specific site. By this account 4chan emerges as generative of an aesthetic grammar invested in creating visual and linguistic paradigms that could help dissociate this online resurgence of the far right from its predecessors. Which is to say, as the place where the right could find the prefix ‘alt’. Thus sited, 4chan is positioned at the centre of a tangle of ideologies which, as Teixeira Pinto has argued, ‘might not cohere politically, but do cohere aesthetically’. Significantly, the memetic alt right codes a particular sensibility that translates the psychical into the political and the aesthetic. Accordingly, the questions I am concerned with in this and following chapters flow from an interest less in what the alt-right is as a historical artefact than what it might mean to think of its aesthetic projects as expressive of a subject position that produces, and is produced by, a subjectivity which invites psychoanalytic elaboration.

Returning to the site itself, Kaës supplies some useful terms for construing 4chan within the formation of group subjectivity. As I will discuss in the next chapter, 4chan has cultivated the self-image of progenitor and guardian of an authentically transgressive online subculture; a place in which the anarchic sensibility of the early World Wide Web can still be accessed. The function of this self-image corresponds, on a dynamic level, with what Kaës identifies as the sociocultural or mythopoetic organisers of groups; schemas ‘of figurability and signification constructed socially by the work of culture, of which myths are the most accomplished representative’. The function of such organisers is to ‘form a prop for the narrative and legitimising function that every group employs to represent itself, to identify itself, to construct an origin for itself and to differentiate itself from other groups’. Following the metaphor of the factory, Kaës asserts that the mythopoetic

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129 Teixeira Pinto, ‘Capitalism with a Transhuman Face’, p. 324.
130 Kaës, p. 117.
131 Ibid.
organiser is comprised of processes which ‘are at work in the development of associative chains, in the formation of the dream space and the narrative structure, and in the formation of symptoms and phoric functions’. The aim of all these processes is the construction of the psychic reality of the group whose specificity will be determined by its particular morphological and topographical features; a reality, Kaës insists, ‘different from that which governs the individual’ in that it ‘binds, assembles, tunes, and conflictualizes parts of the individual psyche’. Through these fragments the group apparatus creates arrangements which constitute the ‘psychic reality of and in the group’, organised ‘according to modalities whereby that which is ‘common’ and ‘shared’ prevails over that which is ‘private’ and ‘different’.

Difference is something that belongs outside of the group space but it is out of fragments that the factory produces a synthetic, if fragile, whole. This matters in particular with regard to 4chan whose users fall into a familiar demographic contained by gender, race and, to a lesser degree, class and age. A measure of sameness here is a prerequisite for the binding processes that give meaning to the group’s assembly as an identity.

Furthermore, the notion of a mythopoetic organiser to cohere this formation alerts us to the ways in which the mythic is normalised in the process of its investment; the exceptional origin becomes common to and among members who invest in the group. And yet, there are those who remain exceptional within the group, playing an outsize role in the group’s formation as an unconscious. Nominated as ‘agents of binding’, these figures embody a host of character types such as ‘the Ancestor, the Child

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132 Ibid., p. 124.
133 Ibid., p. 53.
134 Ibid., p. 111.
135 In Richard Spencer’s words, ‘the average alt-rightist is probably a 28-year-old tech-savvy guy working in IT’. Josh Harkin, ‘Meet Silicon Valley’s Secretive Alt-Right Followers’, *Mother Jones*, (10 March 2017) <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/03/silicon-valley-tech-alt-right-racism-misogyny> [accessed 15 June 2017]. See also Hine, Onaolapo and others.
King, Death, the Hero, the leader, and the scapegoat’.\textsuperscript{136} ‘They fulfil’, Kaës
continues ‘the functions of speech-bearer, symptom-bearer, and dream-
bearer in groups: they are bearers of ideals and illusions, of death and
life’.\textsuperscript{137} Noting how the symptom is once again yoked not only to the dream
but also to speech, one’s thoughts might immediately turn to Trump as a
kind of primal father. Yet, as I suggested earlier, Trump-as-leader is more
usefully thought here as a foil. Kaës’ theory of the correspondence between
the group and the unconscious admits of the superego and the place of a
primal father yet its radicality lies in the model it gives of unconscious
group life that can be mapped outside of Oedipal structures. As Kaës is at
pains to emphasise, the particular psychic reality of the group is determined
by its morphological and topographical features, examples of which he lists
as the ‘plurality of subjects, prevalence of the face to face situation, and
interdiscursivity’.\textsuperscript{138}

These features, which refer primarily to the experimental group work Kaës
carried out in France over the latter half of the last century, would account
for most of the conditions in which we might imagine small to medium
sized groups to assemble at some point or other. Online however, things are
a little different. For one thing, on 4chan there is no face to face encounter,
nor even an avatar for a substitute.\textsuperscript{139} There is also, as already noted,
precious little in the way of a plurality of subjects – if we are to take
plurality as indicating diversity of gender or race. These features of the
site’s morphology and topology, to use Kaës’ vocabulary, stem from the
particular affordances of 4chan’s design and bear elaborating. In addition to
the ubiquity of anonymous users, the site is notable for not maintaining an
archive of posts. This built-in forgetting entails that discussion threads are
lost if they are not continually latched onto to by the group. The same holds

\textsuperscript{136} Kaës, p. 126. In reference to Kaës, Anzieu notes how these myths are the productions of
a ‘secondary elaboration’ on the order of the dream. Anzieu, \textit{The Group and the
Unconscious}, p. 224.

\textsuperscript{137} Kaës, p.126.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., p. 53.

\textsuperscript{139} In this way 4chan may be said to intensify certain general conditions of online sociality.
However, unlike mainstream social media sites, 4chan does not allow avatar images to
accompany a user’s handle, save for the inclusion of a flag signifying nationality.
for individual posts which will slither down the thread and off the site unless they are bumped up by another user’s direct response. Perhaps inevitably, the result of this insistence on the affective present is a privileging of posts that invite an instinctual associative reaction. I would suggest that on 4chan these features comprise something analogous to what Kaës terms the psychoanalytic ‘frame’.\textsuperscript{140} This intersubjective apparatus is ‘first constituted by the psychoanalyst’s psyche and then by an extension of the latter in the psychoanalytic space’.\textsuperscript{141} Its ‘essential function’ is to momentarily and provisionally stabilise the psychotic parts of the personality deposited into it. The frame is thus a ‘receptacle’ of ‘the archaic and the primal’, a fallible configuration necessary for meaning to emerge out of the interplay of projections and identifications.

In other words, the frame marks the space in which the interpretation of the group as an unconscious can be made meaningful and its psychic reality determined. It is in this direction of thought that Kaës comes closest to Anzieu, for whom ‘the group, like the dream is the royal road to the unconscious’.\textsuperscript{142} For if the group is like the dream then it is also like the symptom, expressing not only ‘the association of unconscious wishes that are seeking the path of imaginary fulfillment’ but also the ‘defences against the anxieties that such fulfillments arouse’.\textsuperscript{143} The turn towards dream-work is inevitable for Kaës as it provides not only a model for the symptom of the group’s pathology but also a mode of interpretation through which the idea that the unconscious is structured like a group can be affirmed through the analysis of associative connections. Consequently, the analogy implies ‘common psychic processes that belong to the primary processes: condensation, displacement, multiplication, diffraction, figuration, enactment, and dramatization’.\textsuperscript{144} Kaës writes:

\textsuperscript{140} Kaës is eager to distinguish the ‘frame’ from the ‘setting’ and the ‘situation’, which refer to spatio-temporal and methodological arrangements respectively. Further, he identifies six further, or sub-, functions of the frame: ‘the containing function’ (divided again into depository or crypt); the limitation; the transitional; support and anaclasis; container (of affect presentations into word presentations); and the symbolizing. Kaës, pp. 58-59.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., p. 58.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., p. 184.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., p. 185.
In order for the group to be this ‘analogon’ of the dream, a withdrawal of bodily investment by consciousness must take place in the members of the group; equally indispensable are a topographical and formal regression and an attenuation and dilation of the limits of the ego on the frontier between the overlapping individual and group envelopes. This momentary abandonment of internal limits in favour of the group space has the advantage that the group space becomes co-extensive, either partly or wholly, with the internal space of each member of the group.\textsuperscript{145}

In the dimension of unconscious fantasy Kaës sketches, one is struck by the way, in the dream-mode, the group emerges from a pooling of identity that occurs through the dilation of subjective limits. Anonymity on this scene describes the conditions of association, not just of the group as a psychic field but as a formed subject. Here, then, are the characteristics of what Kaës terms ‘polyphony’ – a chorus that is coextensive with the group and the individual. In this precarious space associations cut across each other haphazardly, joining fragments in a complex and myriad interplay. On 4chan, as in dreams, this is a structural affordance. Threads of thought may be jumbled through connections drawn by any anonymous user, combining and giving extended life to antagonistic or combinatory juxtapositions via a collaborative process that collects the free associations of users conditioned by the particular features of the psychic frame.

Thinking anonymity on 4chan from the perspective of the unconscious helps depart from claims that its affordances merely disinhibit the user toward the more radical assertion that anonymity is a primal condition of the group.\textsuperscript{146}

As Mitchell theorises it, the group is a psychic entity founded on the

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., p. 184.

\textsuperscript{146} The psychologist John Suler has offered the limited formulation ‘online disinhibition effect’ to account for antagonism in anonymous environments. Unfortunately, Suler does not relate his explanation of intersubjective violence online to questions either of the group or the unconscious. John Suler, ‘Psychoanalytic Cyberpsychology’, International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, 14 (2017), 97-102 (pp. 97, 101-102).
symbolisation of sameness that demands anonymity within its bounds. Sameness is the first condition of siblinghood. The first other is created out of the enmity arising in the infant who cannot differentiate between others who share her position. Part of the boldness of the sibling theory is its expansive capacity to see, in the bitter enmity of all group conflict no matter how large, the image of two infants locked together in a primary equation of love and hatred, sameness and difference. Between these two the Law of the Mother, which prevents sibling violence spilling over into murder, ‘opens up the horizontal world of the peer group’ where ‘the male child’s killing the non-kin, actual or symbolic’ is sanctioned.\textsuperscript{147} It is thus the obverse of the maternal prohibition which permits killing – committed under the sign of ‘brotherhood’ between groups selected as ‘not brothers’ that brings the child into the world of the social. By the same token, it is the mother’s affection and love for both of her children that simultaneously guarantees intra-generational slaughter, ensuring that, as Mitchell points out, ‘we are always at war somewhere’.\textsuperscript{148} Crucially, ‘it is the prohibition against sibling murder that enables the \textit{symbolization} of brotherhood’ within which ‘individual possessions and advantages count for nothing: \textit{the group is everything}’.\textsuperscript{149} Subsumption into such a group requires divesting oneself of one’s singularity and embracing the degree of anonymity demanded by a symbolic fratriarchy based on foundational othering, antagonism and, eventually, violence.

In relation to the material at hand, one needs to recognise how the threat lodged in the kernel of sibling, and thus group, violence, is anticipated rather than real and yet felt all the more keenly because it is a fantasy.\textsuperscript{150} To ground these considerations in an image produced by 4chan’s polyphonic topology we might turn to the phantasmatic scene described by the

\textsuperscript{148} Mitchell, ‘Why Siblings?’ p. 815. In regard to the binary choice the Law of the Mother instates between friend and foe, one recalls that Richard Spencer’s unfinished PhD thesis was on the subject of Carl Schmitt, a theorist who elevated such blank difference to the level of political economy.
\textsuperscript{150} As Dimitrakaki and Weeks write in their introduction to a special issue of \textit{Third Text} on ant-fascist art theory, ‘we see […] the move towards a contemporary fascism not in defeating an extant but an anticipated threat’. Dimitrakaki and Weeks, p. 274.
cuckservative meme (see figure 2.13). Cuckservative is a meme made of words not images. Yet a better way of putting it might be to say that it makes a formula of the words it contracts to summon images into a very specific scene. In this sense it is exemplary of condensation, abridging a sundry collection of stories, images, scenes, affects and discrete words into a single and highly loaded signifier: ‘cuck’. The tableau of fantasies packed into the term ‘cuck’ reminds us not only of the way that dreams are dreamt in images but converted into words, but of the way that the relationship between words and images in dreams is often to be found not in their content but in the symbolic equation by which they are linked – as in a symptom. The meme gained traction in United States media during the run up to, and aftermath of, the 2016 election. As with Pepe-Trump, one is tempted to refer this working over of the meme by and in the media to its concision in harnessing so many alt-right narratives. The portmanteau of cuckold and conservative conjures the hoariest of persecutory fantasies. Evoking the racist genre of cuckold pornography, the meme folds over modes of domination resting on sexual difference, gender, and white supremacy onto a theatricalisation of ‘alpha’ and ‘beta’ masculinity. The substitution of ‘cuck’ for ‘con’ positions the recipient of the insult as a voyeur at a coupling which is cast as a titillating adulteration of some specious ‘natural’ law that would interdict miscegenation according to the precepts of ethno-nationalism, as well as that by which women’s bodies are inhere in the paradigms of property and fraternity. Clearly, then, the cuckservative meme would seem to anticipate an interpretation that hinges on patriarchal and capitalist modes of domination which would cast the mainstream conservative as the cuckolded husband or father whose emasculation signals the threat of castration.

Yet again, dream theory would suggest that such a reading be troubled by its contents being so much at the surface, by the apparentness of a secondary revision having been performed. Even if Freud’s concept of the unconscious

151 Despite this substitution the root servare, to ‘keep watch’ and ‘maintain’, is preserved and with it, service, whose French translation sévice draws out the cogantes of servitude and abuse.
were not to hand, we might be guided in looking behind the meme’s surface scene by the direct reference to pornography. Another field in which pleasure is obtained through a slipperiness of subject positions, pornography is, as discussed, a genre expressive of non-reproductive sexuality. This bears on the crucial question the scene poses: With which of the characters does the pleasurable identification arise? The distinction between reproductive and non-reproductive sexuality is key for Mitchell at a theoretical level, affording a conceptualisation of a complex sibling sexuality prior to the instantiation of sexual difference. Thus, when we are speaking of sexuality at this pre-Oedipal level, Mitchell insists that we are talking of gender. Gender is reserved for the lateral axis, with sexual difference belonging to the vertical, in order to reflect the dimensions at play when we talk about the ‘polymorphous possibilities’ of early sexuality running up against the prohibitions and allowances as to who is a legitimate sexual object.\(^{152}\) That prohibition on the lateral is the other side of the Law of the Mother which divides legitimate from illegitimate sexual objects. But whilst the prohibition on sibling murder is on the order of castration, tantamount to a death, the prohibition on sibling incest is weaker than the father’s prohibition of Oedipal sex. As is often the case, sibling incest can be pursued with less catastrophic consequences because lateral difference is near difference, unlike the maximal difference of genital or generational difference. Killing the sibling may mean abandonment and death for the subject, but sibling incest may pass by far less severe sanction. Taken together, however, it is important to emphasise how these two side of the prohibition create the social for the child, by organising the sex and violence of the sibling encounter and locating its legitimate objects the Law of the Mother makes the first lateral difference on which all others build.

Like gender, race is a concern of the lateral axis, both being spectrum categories that pertain to the lateral differences of social groups. In the case of the cuckservative meme, Mitchell’s reading of these near differences allows us to pay closer attention to the exceptional features of the scene.

\(^{152}\) Mitchell, ‘Debating Sexual Difference’, p. 84.
There is, as we have seen elsewhere, a tremendous permutation of subject positions, attributions, prohibitions and transgressions at play. There is no one prescribed role for the fantasist, he may occupy any or all of the positions, enjoying submission and/or domination in an economy of force which is brutalised in every respect on the pivot of sadism and masochism. In this way the scene, as much as it calls gender and race into question – condensing these differences in its very construction – at once denies difference in proclaiming that bodily boundaries may be overcome. Masculinity’s imbrication with whiteness and power appears as haunted by its very fragility and undermining in fantasy, just as the alt-right’s hysterical insistence on gender and white identity, an insistence that hides behind it a violent negation, appears as a failure to come to terms with the realities of social life.\textsuperscript{153} The withdrawal from actuality to fantasy has ready psychic appeal, its transgressions harking back to a time in our personal histories when sexual curiosities were less restricted by bodily boundaries and internalised prohibitions. Harnessed to memetic vehicles of transmission, the scene behind the meme enlists to its cause psychic mechanisms that signal a return to the archaic desires and aggressions which recognising others restricts.

But as much as the meme closes to any empathetic qualities it remains both a group fantasy and a fantasy of the group, material for group association and libidinal investment. The deployment of categories as characters in the scene ensures that the dramatic structure of the fantasy remains open for association. Void of any defining or individualising features these categories may be more easily occupied by members of the group or associated to non-members. In such ways the meme coheres the external to the internal. In blurring the boundaries of ‘individual and group envelopes’, the meme facilitates the co-extensiveness of internal individual and internal group space. The internal enemies that help act out the fantasy emerge as those split off parts of the self that the frame is deployed to hold together.

\textsuperscript{153} I am thinking here of Vice cofounder Gavin McInnes’ Proud Boys, a fraternity which celebrates extreme abstinence as a form of misogynist aggression in complement to their programme of extreme right activism and violence.
Kaës’ work on the nature of shared fantasies finds its roots in Gustave Le Bon’s concept of contagion. These ‘hypnotic’ phenomena transformed every group sentiment into a viral imperative binding the group in unified action.\textsuperscript{154} Freud had earlier linked this hypnotic effect to the mode of ‘thought-transference’ he notes in the Studies on Hysteria.\textsuperscript{155} The pathological inference is useful in prompting us to ask what kind of group is described by a shared fantasy of this type. Once again, Kaës’ terminology is instructive. In proposing two poles that ‘structure the relations between each subject and the whole’ he identifies one of these as the ‘isomorphic pole’ around which the mythopoetic organiser attracts most strongly. It is the site of totally ‘undifferentiated psychic space’.\textsuperscript{156} The pole works, following the root of fascism in \textit{fasces}, to bind or bundle into a uniform perspective; a perspective maintained by the operations of ‘repression, denial and rejection’ that render the subject position of the group into an ideological, or political, position.\textsuperscript{157} The psychic reality constructed through these operations, which for Kaës are the ‘neurotic and psychotic knots of linking’, helps us to see the ways in which the unification of a divided subject is achieved through operations which disavow internal reality and project it outward, illuminating in the cuckservative tableau an image of the subject divided against itself.\textsuperscript{158}

As we have seen, sharing so much in common with A Child is Being Beaten, the cuckservative fantasy might be read as built from its base. Taking both as hysterical fantasies, the former provides a model for a lateral interpretation which reads ‘cuckservative’ against its grain. Such an

\textsuperscript{154} The full passage reads: ‘Contagion is a phenomenon of which it is easy to establish the presence, but which it is not easy to explain. It must be classed among those phenomena of a hypnotic order, which we shall shortly study. In a group every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest. This is an aptitude very contrary to his nature, and of which a man is scarcely capable, except when he makes part of a group’. Freud, ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego’, p. 74.


\textsuperscript{156} Kaës, p. 126.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p. 122.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.
interpretation would make of the meme a sibling intrigue for which Mitchell provides a theoretical frame to make comprehensible the alternating omnipotence and helplessness at the core of the narrative. 159 As *A Child is Being Beaten* demonstrates, the subject position from which the fantasy is fantasised here is the place of the sibling, a place where one may become many. But the question this structure poses for the sibling ‘is not who he is, but where does he stand’. 160 As we shall see, ‘bringing in laterality and the sibling does not’, as Mitchell writes, ‘necessitate a shift of emphasis from the disturbances of psychosexuality to the more anodyne problem of power play’ that runs through these fantasies. 161 Rather, the modes of domination they pose, the perversity of sexuality and violence they figure, need not be construed on the terrain of identity but through the gradient of subject positions that suggest more mobile constellations of difference; where masculinity, as it has reappeared throughout these analyses, can be addressed as an expression of the hysteria it performs.

Wolf men

Their advocate calls them barbarians. He blogs, from his woodland cabin, that his companions are ‘building an autonomous zone, a community defined by face-to-face and fist-to-face connections where manliness and honor matter again’. 162 In the woods this brotherhood works out in ad hoc gymnasia. They light fires and they fight, fist-to-fist, in the manly fashion. That Jack Donovan, documenting the Wolves of Vinland community (figures 2.15 and 2.16) to his thousands of followers across what has become known as the manosphere, is gay has been construed as at odds with
the archaic gender norms this neo-pagan community seeks to recuperate. Yet consider what Donovan claims binds this group:

My brotherhood comes with strings attached. Actually, they’re more like chains. My brotherhood means that we’re in this together all the way to the end of our lives or our friendship. We only get out dead or dead to each other.

‘That’s what brotherhood means to me’. The object of this sibling violence is, of course, his fellow men. The gender norms that bind this community, the gender norms without which it could not be imagined, stretch ‘face-to-face and fist-to-fist’.

‘A violence perversion’, Mitchell writes, is a ‘failure of repression or sublimation’ of sibling murderousness. Sublimation and repression are the containing forces that enact the Law of the Mother and direct violence toward objects more appropriate to the social contract; those who are beyond the fratriarchy, women for example, or any ‘not brothers’ who are excluded on account of race, class, sexuality or culture. But the foundational violence of the Vinland community is what Mitchell might call a psychopathology of everyday life: quotidian in that violence is

163 Similarly familiar claims are made of the Jewish alt-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos, as well as the (comparatively) few women who join alt-right circles. Whilst commentators such as Gogarty have ascribed the elision of these ‘seemingly contradictory positions’ to ‘the possessive investment in whiteness’, I would argue that gender and sexuality, far from subsidiary, are fundamental to the operations of othering on which investment in colour rest precisely because they ground such operations within a psychic framework. Dimitrakaki, Gogarty, and Vishmidt, p. 460.

164 Donovan, ‘We Are Not Brothers’, <https://www.jack-donovan.com/axis/2017/02/we-are-not-brothers/> [accessed 16 December 2017].

165 See Mitchell, Siblings, p. 36.

166 In a sign of Kaës’ acknowledged debt to Bion he mobilizes the latter’s notion of a container to describe the topography of repression and sublimation in the group, whilst extending the term’s analogous relations to the way a dream transforms fantasies but holds them back from full exposure to waking life. The group’s work, in this sense, may be taken as transformative. The question then becomes What happens when the containing function is unavailable or fails and desires spill outside of the frame? For Kaës there are three options – the dreamer ‘acts out’, he dreams outside [the group]’ or ‘he brings a real external object’. Kaës, p. 188. For Bion’s conception of the container-contained see his Learning from Experience (London: Tavistock, 1962) and Elements of Psychoanalysis (London: Heinemann, 1963).
foundational to any fratriarchal community and pathological because it nonetheless excepts the norms that create that community. It is, by any rate, promiscuous. The intra-group violence Donovan and his brothers practise is also perverse, in that it is against the social, its proper object should lie outside rather than inside the group. Yet, for all that, the self-isolation of the Wolves of Vinland has, it seems, created some form of closed system for this violence perversion, even if it has not succeeded in sublimating or repressing its energies. 4chan, on the other hand, has proved less effective. After several similar pre-emptive declarations appeared on the site, including by Alek Minassian, who killed ten and injured at least sixteen further victims in Toronto, the mass murders of Christchurch, Poway, El Paso, and Pittsburgh were posted to the offshoot 8chan.\textsuperscript{167}

Sketching what she forwards as a paradigmatic figure of the male hysteric, Mitchell describes how Don Juan ‘is not taking a woman as a love object; he has utterly identified with her. He projects his jealousy into a series of women making them enact what he would otherwise feel’.\textsuperscript{168} Don Juan cannot contain ‘the unbearable feelings that well up in him when he is displaced’.\textsuperscript{169} In this, he behaves ‘as any good hysteric would’.\textsuperscript{170} The real world as it appears to the hysteric, or as it is made to appear to him, is, in other words, a place for the acting out of the internal and uncontainable violence which attends his irresolution of gender and sexuality. If the victims of Minassian, John Timothy Earnest, Patrick Crusius and Brendan Tarrant bear brutal testament to the uncontainable, unbearable drive to annihilation, their deaths do not invalidate the insight that murder and self-murder are two sides of the same coin: external domination cannot be pursued without a fateful domination of the internal. As Judith Butler has

\textsuperscript{167} On the 15\textsuperscript{th} of March 2019 Brenton Tarrant opened fire through two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 and injuring 49. On the 27\textsuperscript{th} of April 2019 John Timothy Earnest opened fire at the Chabad of Poway Synagogue, California, killing one worshipper and injuring three others. On the 3\textsuperscript{rd} of August 2019 Patrick Crusius killed 22 people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, injuring a further 24 people. Minassian’s attack took place on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} of April 2018. As of congressional hearings into the site’s links to these acts in late 2019 8chan relaunched as 8kun.
\textsuperscript{168} Mitchell, \textit{Mad Men and Medusas}, p. 324.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
recently written, ‘violence done to another is at once a violence done to the self, but only if the relation between them defines them both fundamentally’. Such ‘defining relations’ are precisely what the sibling theory affords gender as a structuring force in social life.

For Mitchell, gender is a word which relates ‘to sexuality that is bound up with survival and hence violence’. If the Oedipus complex separates out sexuality from violence – the latter to the father, the former to the mother, the sibling situation directs both to the same object. But to make sense of this ‘hence violence’ in the context I have just given, it will be necessary to elaborate further on the distinction made above between sexual difference and gender that arises from the sibling theory. Whilst gender roles of course relate to sexual difference they are manifestly not the same thing. Sexual difference marks the point at which one realises one cannot be both man and woman, that one cannot give birth parthenogenetically and that the genital differences that may have previously been observed attain psychic significance. It is a binary choice. Before this watershed moment in a child’s life, one is polymorphously perverse and fully psychically bisexual. In Mitchell’s own words:

‘Gender’ does not imply the necessity of genitality or of a fixed sexual object or of reproduction. Although gender is deployed in the construction of difference, it is not structured around it. The difference between the sexes to which gender necessarily refers lies outside its framework, and thus no explanation of hierarchy is called for – the term applies indifferently to women and to men. Analogously to race, gender produces its own differences; difference is not intrinsic to the concept as it is to ‘sexual difference’. ‘Gender’ is the polymorphously perverse child, grown up. Its morality comes from elsewhere than the subjection of sexuality and violence in the

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172 Mitchell, Siblings, p. 120.
struggle for psychic survival, which at a certain stage is interpreted as dominance.\textsuperscript{174}

She continues:

I suggest then that the morality of gender has to do not with accepting sexual difference but with the resolution of violence, being able to accept instead of murdering the other who is so like one. This self-same other is both the same as the self in human needs while simultaneously other than oneself – likeness in unlikeness, unlikeness in likeness.\textsuperscript{175}

The self-same other that is both like and unlike, is of course, the sibling and in Mitchell’s formula it is through not acting on the wish to murder the sibling that the morality of gender emerges – a morality she elsewhere condenses into the shift to the either/or of genital and reproductive sexuality from the both/and of gender, masculinity and femininity. Pinning gender to the question of survival, Mitchell establishes sibling sexuality under the sign of violence in a high stakes game for the infant, a game in which the formation of masculinity depends on resolving the confusion, indeed conflation, between who one is and where one stands. If one insists on a subject position as absolute and fixed it is because preserving one’s psychic position is taken to be the same thing as preserving one’s place in the real world, it is a matter of survival. This equivalence readily allows for a correspondence between psychic and political regression. For if the Wolves of Vinland, like the Patriot Movement before them, interpret any modest move toward the recognition of marginalised others as full subjects as a threat to their own existence – as an annihilation of their place or position, then they enact as a political imperative a perversion of the morality Mitchell yields from gender. Isolation, rejecting the social, merely inverts the desire for the removal of others. It would follow that a masculinity

\textsuperscript{174} Mitchell, \textit{Siblings}, p. 125
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
pitched on the integrity of its own sovereignty has held on to this early conflation of territory-as-identity and the attendant oscillation between omnipotence and helplessness. In this way, and in conjunction with the Wolves’ embrace of those motifs of the 1930s that equate virility and fertility, woman and territory, Donovan’s insight into the primal violence of lateral relations does indeed destabilise the self-image of the group. But not so much by revealing the provisional and fraudulent connection between masculinity and virility as exposing the hysterical fantasy that subtends the group. The defining relations of Donovan’s wolf men – those ‘face-to-face and fist-to-fist connections’, lay bare the root of the pathology in the consolidation of fraternity.176

By the terms of Mitchell’s analysis, failure to accept the other, to submit to murderous desires, to cave-in to domination, is a failure of gender’s morality test. Morality on this score would intervene in the transposition from fantasy to reality, a space in which it would perform the transformative work of sublimation. A failure of transformation is thus apparent in cases in which reality conforms too neatly to fantasy, where the threat registered in one dimension is reciprocated by aggression in another. Addressing this phenomenon, Mitchell has engaged Charlotte Bühler’s work on transitivism, a term that classifies a form of identification observed in small children whereby the inter-subjective relation is dominated by the characteristics of mirroring. Without the alienation with which Lacan later invested the concept, transitivism can stand as a form of distinctly lateral reciprocity, describing a feature of infant inter-subjectivity where the experiences of one child carry across to another in an inversion. In her use of the theory Mitchell gives examples where: ‘one child falls over and the other cries; one hits the right eye of the other and claims it has been hit, clutching its matching left eye to prove the point’.177 ‘Bullied victims’, she writes,

176 Perhaps this argument needs further elaboration; by it I mean to suggest that the insistence on a sovereign gender supersedes Donovan’s apparent difference of object choice and, further, that as a hysterical symptom this insistence exposes the contradictory premise of the group’s formation, based not on certainty of the relation between place and position but on its confusion.
‘madly, are imagined to be standing in the bully/tyrant’s place’.\textsuperscript{178} The themes of pain and violence are hard to miss in these illustrations through which Mitchell positions this type of mirroring as ‘the foundational subjectivity of lateral individuals and collectivities of sisterhoods and brotherhoods, affines, partners and enemies’.\textsuperscript{179}

Whilst transitivism by itself doesn’t untangle the knot by which masculinity commits to domination at the level of gender, it does help distil the dynamic of lateral violence moving across from fantasy to reality as dependent on a certain degree of intersubjective fluidity. At the crux of Mitchell’s work on siblings is the proposition that gender, through the proximity of sibling relations, provides an always available alternative subject position. The preeminent similarity is that one’s sibling shares the same position relative to the family structure. Differences such as gender, are secondary and so, if one can share a subject position – if one’s sibling of a different gender is still ‘more me’ – then one can also occupy their gender. As Mitchell points out, conceiving gender on these terms helps destabilise monolithic constructions of masculinity and femininity in a way that psychoanalysis premised on a binary sexual division cannot. Gender, in Mitchell’s terms, retains the polymorphousness and perversity of pre-Oedipal sexuality.\textsuperscript{180} It accommodates deviation from reproductive sexuality. This feels deeply salient when we consider how neither the cuckservative drama, nor the betamale present models of masculinity we might expect from a political ideology committed to keeping ultra conservative masculinity intact.

In \textit{Still Life} the scene in which a fox sinks slowly into the mud would seem to act out all this out. For whilst, as I have suggested, one can’t help but read this passage of the video as a metaphor for castration one could also read it as a disruption of the verticalization Mitchell’s sibling work helps us think

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{178} Mitchell, \textit{Siblings}, p. xvi
\bibitem{180} She writes ‘although there is always interaction, the perpetuation of the polymorphously perverse, non-reproductive sexuality takes place through lateral, not vertical relationships, starting with siblings in the context always of peers and later affines’. Mitchell, \textit{Siblings}, p. 127.
\end{thebibliography}
beyond. This would entail a simple change of perspective from which we entertain not so much a vertical (body) descending as a horizontal (the bog) in the process of asserting its planar primacy. Of course, it can be both. In Klaus Theweleit’s study of the Freikorps he collects several fantasies on this theme in which the armoured male body succumbs to feminised and formless substances. The move is from the soldier standing erect to his defenestration and collapse, his body image fragmented under the pressure of an uncontained and chaotic interior. The mud and the mass stand for the abject and the amorphous, that which threatens the male subject from within and in defense of which he armours himself by way of metaphors of the machine and the military group. Thought through siblings however, the ambivalence which is at play in the idea of the-feminine-within is given a different slant by Rafman’s fox. If acknowledgement of one’s psychic bisexuality was conceived as a surrender by Theweleit’s Freikorps, the furry – whose gender is only intimated – tells a slightly different story, one in which parody is crucial. Masculinity here is something tried on easily as an animal suit. Yet, as so many atrocities have shown, even at its most tragic and comic, the performance of gender remains a potentially lethal weapon.

Mitchell has borrowed the case history of Freud’s patient Sergei Pankejeff to illustrate the formation of male hysteria within the frame of gender and sibling relations. Famously given the sobriquet the Wolf Man, Pankejeff was notorious for his transgressive desires which Freud routed back, via the dream of several white wolves perched on a tree, to fantasies about the primal scene. Mitchell’s reinterpretation hones in on Pankejeff’s relationship with his precocious older sister and questions Freud’s mild acceptance of the Wolf Man’s revisionist claim that he had been the initiator

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of his sibling romances. She asserts that Pankejeff’s ‘not as yet fully formed boundaries’ facilitated an identification with his abusing sister that interlocked with sibling sex and violence to precipitate a loss of bearings as to where he stood in the family unit. It is not the content per se – the ‘power play’, but ‘the permutations and identifications’ that ‘succeed the loss of recognition and position’ which are structural to the Wolf Man’s hysteria. 183

As the term which describes the pathological ir/resolution of the sibling complex, hysteria is inscribed (as indeed its etymology suggests) with the possibility of being in more than one place or position at the same time. 184 But, in being in two places at once, one is also not present enough in either, so the hysteric is, as Mitchell reminds us, a subject in search of a subject position. His crisis is one of displacement, in response to which the over insistence on one’s recognition as a masculine subject expresses the aspiration of mastery over a psychic reality one cannot accept. By these protestations the male hysteric exposes what Kaja Silverman called the ‘dominant fiction’ of masculinity. Silverman’s incisive analysis described the disintegration and splintering of a myth of male mastery. The men she writes about appear broken to pieces, exposing their vulnerability against the very self-image of their gender. Enriching her analysis with a perceptive reading of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Silverman notes how the notion of masculinist mastery ‘exists in a parasitic or anaclitic relation to the death-drive’. 185 It pushes against the compulsion to unbind exerted by the thanatropic rhythm that beats inexorably toward psychic disintegration. The psychic disintegration or chaos that hysteria designates thus seems crucial for locating what lies behind the apparently, but only apparently, deviant masculinities the alt-right presents. There one glimpses the defensive nature of this performance, a manoeuvre that from Pepe Trump, to the betamale to the Wolves of Vinland, seeks to maintain the idea, even if only as a fiction, of a contained self against the shadow of its disintegration.

183 Mitchell, Mad Men and Medusas, pp. 328-329.
184 From the Greek husteriokós, ‘suffering in the uterus, hysterical’ (from ὑστέρα / hustéra, ‘womb’) on account of its supposed wandering (or displacement) through the body.
Towards the end of her study of male hysteria in *Mad Men and Medusas*, Mitchell asks ‘whether hysteria itself has a gendered dimension or whether such an ascription is in fact an ideological imposition’. Although she has already answered this question in the negative – both genders are ‘equally vulnerable’ – her purpose in these concluding pages returns to the central premise of her project: if a hysterical man appears feminine it is by consequence of hysteria’s conflation with femininity in its drift from a clinical to colloquial vocabulary. In her efforts to resist this drift and unbridle hysteria from femininity, Mitchell develops a framework for thinking hysteria as a condition of the social through a lateral model of psychoanalysis. As I have suggested, what that framework helps us draw out from the presentation of alt-right masculinity is a subjectivity internally divided. Divided, that is, across a range of positions that stretch the spectrum from masculinity to femininity. Yet, if the above has sought to address how male hysteria in the alt-right can be thought through psychic bisexuality, it has not addressed directly the evacuation, or annihilation, of subjecthood at the level of woman. Across the alt-right the denial of female subjectivity is so absolute it is deafening yet, as we have seen, the feminine subject position is retained as available to the male hysteric. Women’s autonomous subjecthood by these terms cannot be accommodated, it falls outside of what subject positions may be recognised, which is to say it falls outside of those positions that may be occupied by the male hysteric and instead in the place Frantz Fanon described as ‘the zone of non-being’. From this perspective, I would suggest that what permits entry to the few women who have emerged within the peripheries of the alt right is, before an investment in whiteness and white identity politics, rather an investment in the fictions of male hysteria.

Whilst the question of women and the alt-right is for another project, it bears raising here, however briefly, if only to register the challenge it poses

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to how we think through the contention of Mitchell’s theory of hysteria ‘as a persistent feature of the human condition’. Yet if persistent, then not perceived, as the disappearance of male hysteria from official clinical parlance has demonstrated and thus, if a feature of the human condition, then one that is concealed as much as revealed by cultural forms. For hysteria is characterised by its misrecognition. ‘Supremely mimetic’ and remarkably agile in its disguises, hysteria is ever ready to take up new modes as a symptom.¹⁸⁸ But in this adaptability some continuities and discontinuities with previous psychoanalytically informed studies of fascist subjectivity may be recognised. For if the fascists of the 1930s have been construed as hierarchical groups in thrall to a Fuhrerprinzep, their fraternities were well versed in understanding and expressing the relationship between their gender politics and the technological forms available to them. Today’s technologies are not so much the armoured carapaces we find in Theweleit, their figurations in the social imagination are more diffuse. The repertory of plausible forms has mutated and the technologies which frame group formation are more diverse. Thus, if hysteria appears today peculiarly harnessed to our present conjunction of the social and the technological, it is within that conjunction’s dominant abstractions that it needs to be recognised.

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**Lateral relations**

To encapsulate the psychic reality the memetic alt-right offers entry to, a well-known scene in Lana and Lilly Wachowski’s 1999 film *The Matrix* offered a neat solution. The ‘red pill’ meme (figure 2.17) harks to the juncture in the movie’s narrative where the central protagonist, the aptly named Neo, is offered a choice between two pills, one red, one blue. The latter will return Neo to his quotidian life as Thomas Anderson, a computer

programmer, the former will deliver him, with no possibility of return, to a revelatory consciousness.\textsuperscript{189} Having chosen the red pill Keanu Reeves’ character finds his prior life revealed as a simulation designed to hide his real existence as one nodal organism in a vast system of techno-capitalist extraction. Thus, Neo emerges into a quintessential paradigm of postmodernity.

As a figuration the network is an exemplary blend of the disciplinary convergences that shaped the modern Internet. It has ascended to supremacy as the dominant paradigm for how we compose and give shape to the social field, and it is irreducibly social because plural, perforating and lateral. Obtaining from the same conjuncture of specialisms that were represented at the Macy Conferences, memes have appeared within the imaginary of the network to limn and negotiate the subgroups the network maps. As the red pill suggests, memes do not just border but create psychic realities in contrast to others. Which is to say, the network provides the figuration within which the meme, as a formation which might express psychic conflict, emerges as a symptom. For, to be red pilled in the alt-right vernacular is to break from a consensus of actuality toward what is deemed from the outside as outside of sanity.

In \textit{Walled States, Waning Sovereignty}, Wendy Brown takes up nationalism’s present resurgence through the ‘passion for wall building’ that has accompanied the hegemony of globalisation.\textsuperscript{190} Walling, for Brown, manifests the tensions that attend the rise of the network as a predominant figure for the social. Sovereignty in the throes of its own waning madly reasserts itself in what Brown parses as defense mechanisms expressive of psychic resistance. The tensions she identifies between ‘between opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and reinscription’ and, relatedly, ‘between global networks and local nationalisms, virtual power

\textsuperscript{189} Clearly the messianic narrative of the franchise which is embedded anagrammatically in Reeves’ character’s name is coherent with Mitchell’s sibling thematic.

and physical power, private appropriation and open sourcing, secrecy and transparency, territorialization and deterritorialization’ show that whilst states may act as sovereign individuals they are comprised of groups.\textsuperscript{191} Responding to these tensions are fantasies Brown counts as ‘of the dangerous alien’, ‘an increasingly borderless world’, ‘containment’, ‘impermeability’, ‘purity, innocence and goodness’.\textsuperscript{192}

At which point I want to pause briefly on something Anzieu says about illusions and the power of certain figurations in the group situation. He writes: ‘the metaphor may be factually erroneous, nevertheless it is persuasive and effective, as high powered ideas often are, because it corresponds to the phantasised reality of the group, because it expresses, as do myths, the transformation of the images that govern underlying forces’.\textsuperscript{193} The illusion, in other words, is resistant to reality testing, indeed it as all the more persuasive and effective because it does not submit to actuality. This is, in effect, where Brown ends up at the end of \textit{Walled States}, invoking Freud’s conception of illusion to account for the persistence of sovereignty’s theological dimension. Illusions in this account ‘do not die upon being disproved’ because they are not errors.\textsuperscript{194} They differ from anything which could be mistaken on account of being powered by a wish which they express in the imagistic form of a scene. They are, in this respect, another analagon for the dream. Anzieu expands this homology: ‘the group situation is thus perceived as anxiety-arousing with the same intensity as it is perceived as phantasy wish-fulfilment [thus confirming] our notion that the group, like the dream and the symptom, is to be linked to both wishes and defences’.\textsuperscript{195} Necessarily the group illusion sustains ‘a protective regression’ which may be both ‘bewitching’ and ‘self-destructive’.\textsuperscript{196} Along this path the group succumbs to projection and splitting, committing to a ‘vicious circle of repetition’.\textsuperscript{197} Anzieu is telling

\textsuperscript{191} Brown, pp. 7-8.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., pp. 115-121.
\textsuperscript{193} Anzieu, \textit{The Group and the Unconscious}, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{194} Brown, p. 132.
\textsuperscript{195} Anzieu, \textit{The Group and the Unconscious}, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., p. 159.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
us here a crucial part of what psychoanalysts working with groups – notably Bion and Hannnah Segal in England as well as Kaës an Anzieu in France – have long known about their subject: that the group is an unstable psychic entity prone to actively pursue the conditions of its own destruction. In regards to the group as a subject, lines that are drawn and redrawn in wire, bricks, mortar or cement, bespeak not just a territorial or power differential but two distinct conceptions of the world’s appearance ossified into a perspective, a stance, a position that is, because a group perspective, unstable. Summoning in fantasy the frenzy of conflict they anticipate and provoke in reality, these structures provide, on each side, a ready hold for a war footing.

The physical constructions Brown surveys map the anxieties of the network as it recalibrates the imaginative geography of group violence. Far from the only form available for its expression, walling nonetheless indexes a condition of extreme paranoid anxiety. Taking up Mitchell’s notion of violence perversion, Nixon has noted how in such situations ‘murderousness and the polymorphous perversity of infancy both come into the ascendant’. This violence is promiscuous as well as perverse. In its grip, Nixon writes, ‘the repressed violence of sexuality becomes manifest in rape, torture, and sexualised killing’. But war, the maximal expression of violence perversion, is most often experienced not between states but non militarily, as an act of civil murderousness. One may be at war with oneself, one’s family or one’s own community. Mitchell’s insight as to the sexualisation locked into the pathology of this violence is thus crucial in conceiving at the level of subjectivity the type of campaigns that understand withholding sex as a legitimate affront deserving of lethal retribution. The ‘act of atrocity’, writes Nixon, ‘as a display of violence perversion, restages

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200 Ibid., p. 199.
the aberrant act, or fantasy, of torturing or murdering the sibling’. 201
Violence perversion comes, as it were, home.

Designating sibling sexuality as a sexuality that relates first to violence, as war sexuality, Mitchell’s lateral relations theorise intersubjectivity in a mode the network is ill equipped to apprehend. For as much as the network understands sameness as the fundamental equivalence between nodes, it cannot encompass the generative capacity of subjects to create difference out of what is shared. It would seem imperative, then, to recognise that this is what lies at the heart of Mitchell’s lateral relations, which are nothing less than a radical reassessment of how a theory of the other might be conceived. But in as much as the theory speaks to violence premised on familiar categories of difference, the implications of sibling sexuality and violence also need to be posed to those abstractions used to shorthand the vast matrix of positions one holds in relation to others – most pressingly at the level of male hysteria which would more productively be returned to a pathological category than be confused for its toxic symptoms. For between those figurative abstractions of the social and the kernel of sex and violence at the root of subjectivity is where the relationship Freud saw between the symptom and both the dream and the group needs to be unfurled. Avatars for the symptom, the dream and the group evinced and concealed pathological conflicts. It is the provocation of this chapter that the meme, sharing so much with the psychic condition of the group and the dream, may be usefully, if provisionally, apprehended along the same thread. There is more than a little of this in Apter’s meme analysis which, gesturing at Lyotard’s characterisation of the postmodern subject as ‘a nodal point’, holds that ‘because of their predication on impersonal intimacy, memes shift the ground from an ethics of direct responsibility to an ethics of limited liability and indirect consequence in moral action’. 202 ‘The emotionally reactive, remotely responsible meme user’, Apter continues, ‘yields the

201 Ibid.
202 Apter, p. 7.
political actor as triumphalist raptor or rogue agent’. Here the meme user is recast, or revealed, as meme warrior, equipped in combat with ‘fully weaponised […] technologies of harassment and hate mongering’. Yet if memes, whilst not owned by either side of the political spectrum, do possess an ‘aggressive character’ regardless of the projects they are enlisted to, Apter is surely correct to recognise in their ‘association with mass consciousness’ the outline of a symptom. Memes, in her account, are mobilised by ‘channelling the epidemiological analogy to an aggressive virus and all that comes with it: imaginaries of disease, contamination, toxicity, and demographic incursion’. ‘As an episteme’, the meme ‘is essentially pandemic and bellicose’.

A salutary reflection gained through the memes we have considered is that as much as recognising hysteria as a pathology of the social makes the psychic efficacy of memes visible, memes, by the same token, illuminate hysteria as a condition of the social. Thus, if any sort of royal road to a more incisive appreciation of how our technological conjuncture reimagines and re-attires the pathologies of the group, they would surely be so on account of the transmission of unconscious communication. This would be as crucial a part of their transformation and transmission of affects as their explicit acts of political speech. For if memes speak not just their own polyglot vernaculars but a vast array of other languages, verbal and non-verbal, that is not to say they remain masters of their own tongue and invulnerable to it slipping. In such ways memes un-contain fantasies as much as they contain them. Impersonal and impersonalising, a generous way of saying objectifying or dehumanising, these memes also collectivise fantasy. They create positions, subjective and political, that are coextensive with the individual and the group. But in as much as memes articulate the

203 ‘Not surprisingly’, Apter concludes, ‘memes enjoy a particularly robust life on the political right’. Ibid.
204 Ibid.
205 Ibid., p. 8.
206 Ibid.
207 The key here, as so often with hysteria, is recognition. In the last sentence of Mad Men and Medusas, Mitchell writes: ‘hysteria insists that we notice ‘siblings’; seeing ‘siblings’ forefronts hysteria as a persistent feature of the human condition’. Mitchell, Mad Men and Medusas, p. 346.
many voices hosted by the unconscious, they expose the meme user as a split subject harbouring fantasies of enemies and persecutors internal and external.

In the final chapter of *Mad Men and Medusas*, Mitchell offers an intriguing, if all too brief, speculation apposite to this discussion. ‘Between the nightmare and the dream’, she writes, ‘are bad dreams’.208 This third category goes beyond Freud’s distinction between anxiety and wish fulfilling dreams. Bad dreams, she suggests, are survival dreams yet what haunts them originates in fantasy. They are dreams in which the subject struggles manically to cope with the threat of his annihilation, to contain that violence within the envelope of the dream. In waking life, the hysteric is liable to despatch such violence outward. Bad dreams are also confused dreams, caught between wish fulfilment and the escape of waking up (the being allowed to ‘die safely’ that the nightmare offers its traumatised dreamer.) They feel extremely real, with the quality of hypnagogic or hypnopompic states. ‘In a good dream, the ego is mobile, occupying different people in different stances’.209 In a bad dream, however, ‘this ego mobility is excessive, frantic and bizarre’.210 Bad dreams, are ‘full of incongruous juxtapositions suggesting the iterativeness and compulsiveness of the [dream’s] strategy’.211 The ‘ego is not mobile so much as driven from pillar to post’.212 The bad dream, it turns out, is a peculiarly intense and illicit dream. It is a high-stakes dream in which anxieties and desire are wrapped ever more tightly around each other to impede the work of the censor. The bad dream puts the mechanisms of dream-work into overdrive. The system, it seems, can barely cope. What is worse, from these dreams, one doesn’t wake up.

208 Ibid., p. 336.
209 Ibid.
210 Ibid.
211 Ibid.
212 Ibid., p. 337.
‘Shades of the present’¹
Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty

‘Nevertheless, by turning in circles the displaced
preserve their identity and improvise a shelter.
Built of what? Of habits, I think, of the raw material
of repetition, turned into a shelter […] At its most
brutal, home is no more than one’s name’²
John Berger, and our faces, my heart, brief as photos

Put somewhat provocatively, one might go so far as to say that it was the
group which gave Freud the courage of his conviction about dreams.³ In

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¹ In what feels like an internal voice, the note supports Foster’s discussion of Walter
Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and a temporal ambivalence celebrated by surrealism but which can
just as easily be exploited for radical reactionary, as well as emancipatory, political
projects. Compulsive Beauty, p. 288 n. 97.
² John Berger, and our faces, my heart, brief as photos (New York: Random House, 1984),
p. 64.
³ A measure of the importance of the group in Freud’s thought can be found by considering
how often the group provided an armature for his most enduring interests and theoretical
constructions, in which we might include: the family, the unconscious peopled as a group.
other words, that it was the remote observation of external life, of social life—tellingly, man in his plurality—which backed up what had been learned through private investigation of the individual psyche. Dreams had first opened the possibility, subsequently corroborated beyond his doubt, for a thesis of an unconscious rife with conflicts formative to every moment of waking and un-waking life. Whatever therapeutic potential the dream allowed for, however, the group, as Freud saw again and again, seemed incurable of itself.\(^4\) By the time war menaced Europe again in 1939, a lifetime of evidence had confirmed to him that its pathologies were irredeemable, that there was something about the group that produced a resistance to its own interests.\(^5\)

As Jacqueline Rose has noted of this theme in Freud’s thinking, it was on the heels of his work on narcissism in 1914 that he overturned his model of the mind in the face of war, arriving at the problem of collective life as the urgent need ‘to be recognised, acknowledged, seen’.\(^6\) ‘If we need others, it is not so much to satisfy as to fashion ourselves’.\(^7\) The collective subject, like the hysteric, thus opened up another road to exposing the unconscious. ‘At moments’ Rose writes, ‘it is as if the mass becomes the unconscious—without logic, knowing ‘“neither doubt nor uncertainty”’, living a type of collective dream’.\(^8\) But if group life presents an illusion on the order of the dream, it is also capable of effecting profound disillusionment. Disillusionment might entail, as it did in the context of the First World War’s mass inhumanity, stripping back a false sense of self, the image we carry around of ourselves as people and as groups and so not coincidentally

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\(^4\) As we have seen, subsequent analysts developed a range of methodologies for working therapeutically with groups.

\(^5\) To gauge the build of this conviction one should make an exception to Andre Green’s recommendation to always read Freud backwards and move from ‘Thoughts For The Times On War And Death’ (1915) to ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego’ (1921), ‘The Future of an Illusion’ (1927) and ‘Civilization and Its Discontents’ (1930).

\(^6\) Rose, ‘Mass Psychology’, p. 63. Rose also observes that it was in 1914 that Freud wrote his ‘Moses of Michelangelo’, a text which can be read almost as a self-portrait. In the later ‘Moses and Monotheism’, Freud’s identification with Moses is articulated in accordance with his second topography.

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 65.
does this disillusionment, which occurs most devastatingly in the mirror of war, share some characteristics with the aim of psychoanalysis itself.

In exposing ‘the unconscious foundation that is the same for everyone’ the ‘masses’ opened up a perspective on social life utterly disabused of its pretensions to civility.9 The ‘hysteric’ mass, as it appears in his early body of work, ‘is showing us something that we all need to see’.10 Lifting the veil of ‘human constraint’ it seeks to overthrow the prohibitions which socialise the individual, leaving instead the psychoanalytic truth Joan Riviere gave voice to when she observed that ‘our hate is distributed more freely than our love’.11 Riviere’s insight carries shades of Mitchell’s assertion of sibling sexuality as war sexuality, love entangled with but overtaken by hate, and, as with Freud, Mitchell’s contention also emerges from the figure of the male hysteric. Thus, it should come as no surprise that regression appears most conspicuously in Mitchell’s work in Mad Men and Medusas, whose project it is to reclaim hysteria not just as a pathology but one unbridled from associations with femininity. A small sampling of those pages which address regression directly shows how tightly she binds it to her subject:

[…] the crucial importance for hysteria of regression: confronted with a sibling, the infant regresses to wanting to be the unique baby it previously was.

[…] even childhood hysteria is essentially regressive: struck by some experience that either is or can be converted to a trauma, the hysteric (individual or group) reverts to a childhood or infantile mode of behaviour.

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Regarding the terminology, Rose provides an excellent analysis of the implications opened up by Strachey’s translation of ‘die Massen’ as ‘group’ and Jim Underwood’s recuperation of the more literal ‘mass’ psychology. I should note that, whilst recognising this important difference between the terms, they need not overly concern us here.

10 Rose, ‘Mass Psychology’, p. 64.

Hysteria, however, regresses further back to the ‘uncontained’, the raw beta elements.

It is because hysteria is regressive, from childhood or adulthood, that it is sexual. There is a sexual seeming frenetic discharge underlying it – which is the frantic avoidance of falling into the hole of non-recognition.

I would argue hysteria is itself regression.12

Laplanche and Pontalis remind us that regression derives its psychoanalytic valence from action in temporal and topographical fields – ‘to walk back, to retrace one’s steps’.13 But if the temporal direction is fixed at some point or position in the past – regression has to return the subject to somewhere – there is scope for the idea that one may travel via different paths, that there is perhaps more than one route for regression to take, more than one object relation along which it might be measured, and that it is in regards to these relations that the pathology comes into view. For analysts of the group such as Anzieu regression holds a special purchase. As Freud was clear that ‘we may speak of the dream as having a regressive character’, it is essential to the homology the-group-is-like-a-dream that the dream is the space of the group’s regression.14 If ‘in groups, as in dreams, what happens is the result of displacement, condensation and symbolic representation of wishes’ both are subject to the operations of regression in their subordination of reality.15 Oriented towards the fulfilment of wishes, the group does not just supply an illusion in which such desires are articulated, it is itself an illusion:

Some individuals choose activities and partners that reveal their phantasies and indicate their destinies. In a similar way, all groups

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13 Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 386.
15 Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious*, p. 134. Anzieu differentiates three types of regression at work in the group: ‘chronological, topographical and formal or structural’ (pp. 143-144).
have their symbolism, their myths. In other words, the group is an arena in which the unconsciouses of members interact and produce phantasized constructions that may be short lived or stable, paralyzing or stimulating.\textsuperscript{16}

In consideration that Freud was, from the start, convinced about dreams and dream-like states holding the keys to hysterical conflicts, I would like to propose that the regressive, paralysing aspect of group illusions may be thought along the lateral axis of Mitchell’s sibling complex.\textsuperscript{17} This would entail that we entertain the notion of lateral regression, or regression which comes into view through the relations which build on sibling dynamics as opposed to regression that indexes Oedipal formations. Lateral regression is a formulation intended not just to harness what thinking regression through Mitchell’s lateral theory of psychoanalysis might expose but also to prompt the ways in which that theory’s full investment in the social might be brought into dialogue with the political and the aesthetic valences of the word regression. For obvious reasons, such a dialogue between these senses of the term appeals to the task of situating the alt right as an aesthetic project with its own peculiar histories. More concretely, regression that is lateral would map backward the history of the subject becoming or unbecoming social through the crucible of Mitchell’s sibling encounter and its nexus of hysteria. A process of desocialization, lateral regression would refer to a reversal of the movement from the pre-social to the social. It is to do primarily with how the seeds of negotiating difference at the level of gender and race are sown in the earlier and first encounter with some who shares one’s own position within the family unit – someone that is not above or below oneself, someone on the same level. Thus, the privileged relationships are those multiplying groups of sisters, brothers and their

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 134. Hewing to a Freudian stance, Anzieu differs with Bion’s contention that a group’s illusions can be made to disappear if they are demystified: ‘our experience has shown the opposite: where there is a group there are phantasies which circulate among its member; these bind group member together in both their activities and their anxieties’. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} The analogical sequence by which the hysteria is like the dream, is like the group, is like regression will be clear by now. It will also be apparent that it is by this ‘is like’ that I am attempting to deploy a methodology that follows the theory, one aimed at asking what inserting the meme into this sequence might help bring out.
substitutes that spread out sideways from the family unit rather than those who exemplify descent or generational difference. Against the classical, vertical conception of regression, oriented always in relation to the parents, and which images the subject moving from adult to infant, lateral regression does not picture a contrast of a given or pre-established (i.e. generational) difference. Instead, it points toward a journey from social to pre social subjechthood, reversing the rites of passage that attend socialization, and toward a rejection or repudiation of the Law of the Mother and its inauguration of the differences on which all groups build.

Thinking about the alt-right in aesthetic terms along this trajectory puts to work several of its most prominent characteristics. As Nagle, Philips, Teixera Pinto and others have shown, the early to middle 1990s are important for the alt-right because of the claim its project makes on certain of that moment’s legacies. The memetic alt-right’s embrace of anonymity and leaderless organisation, easy transgression, the harnessing of collective and dispersed production, the strategic temporary occupation of online zones, the preference for design principles that eschew corporate aesthetics – all have histories which intertwine at the moment in which internet technologies became social. Following the release of the Mosaic browser, widespread access to the World Wide Web meant that the Internet ceased be the preserve of the academy and the military and spread out into growing collections of artists, activists, hobbyists and theorists. The cultural attitudes of such groups could hardly help but be expressive of the various ways one could invest in the fantastic possibilities of these new technologies. Such promises were a part of the technology’s cultural lineage, the residue of those ideas and attitudes which had shaped its paths of development. Still, broadly speaking, a minority interest, a countercultural stance in these early enthusiasts cultivated its own distinctive, if manifestly porous, sensibility.

18 See Nagle, Kill All Normies, pp 10-67; Teixeira Pinto, ‘Capitalism with a Transhuman Face’; Phillips, This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things. See also Main; and Wendling.
19 On the many and fascinating relations between the counterculture and the development of the Web, see Fred Turner, From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
The memetic alt-right’s embrace of this sensibility is at least one of the things the prefix ‘alternative’ suggests; not just as a feint to distance familiar political demands from an expectation of what their proponents should look and sound like, but to construct and stake a claim on an authentic internet subculture. A few signal examples need raising here. 4chan’s bulletin board format, a sparse architecture for collecting diverse formats of information seemed to institute certain democratic principles, these were, at least, the connotations ascribed to the bulletin board by the first large scale online social networks such as The Thing or The WELL.\textsuperscript{20} The stripped back grid, void of ornament or elaboration, bared the principle of equality between information consistent with the idea that hierarchies of all kinds were inimical to the principles of Web culture and design. The mode of assembly most appropriate to such a decentralised format is a strictly observed anonymity by which whatever is deposited in the group space belongs to the group’s collective endeavour, its group sense of self. On 4chan gratuitous and offensive content sustains the group illusion by which the site understands itself as a guardian of an authentic internet subculture; in providing a facility for encounters with prejudice and the obscene, 4chan casts itself in the subcultural tradition of earlier ‘shock sites’ such as rotten.com and somethingawful.com. The fealty of this retrospection is apparently to a less censorious internet, that is, to an internet before the advent of Web 2.0 platforms which de-skilled, mainstreamed, and corporatised internet use. A conspicuous distancing from platforms like Google, Facebook and Twitter means sticking to ‘low tech’ as a statement about identity, as a look. Net.artist Alexei Shulgin explains: ‘processor speed, screen resolution, color depth, or net-work bandwidth – 4-bit, 8-bit music, 16-color pixelized visuals, slow rendering, compressed image and

\textsuperscript{20} 4chan was based on the earlier anime sharing site 2chan from which it borrowed its design features. I might also note that the first US based white nationalist website, Stormfront, began as a bulletin board system before being published as a website in 1995. On the valences of bullet board systems see Gabriella Coleman ‘From Internet Farming to Weapons of the Geek’, \textit{Current Anthropology}, 58 (2017), 91-102. The WELL, or the The Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link, on the other hand emerged from Stewart Brand’s seminal catalogue of the same name. See also Turner.
video with artefacts – create an authentic computer aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of low-tech’. 21

I quote Shulgin here not to suggest any personal or professional association with the alt-right but to set up the idea of a correspondence between net.art and the alt-right as two projects which have changed the way we think about the social online. As Rachel Greene surmised, net.art was understood by those active in its networks precisely as ‘an alternative social field where art and everyday life were merged’. 22 Thus for artists like Shulgin the aesthetics of low-tech were loaded with certain political implications and assumptions. Whilst the net.art milieu forged a space in which these assumptions were both contested and amplified through a sophisticated appreciation of what particular formats and design choices entailed for being with others, for the cyber-optimist working at the intersection of art and activism the early Web afforded the sense of a precipice moment for reimagining of self and other. Underlying such perspectives, a deep investment in the idea that lateral formations where intrinsically democratic was fundamental. Formulated most prominently in the work of Manuel Castells this idea of horizontality was commonplace and endlessly applicable. By it, the conviction pervaded that a new and emancipatory politics could be wrought by the network. 23


At that moment and fully in its spirit, a website appeared that provides a measure of our present distance from the possibilities they harboured. Arriving at this peculiar online performance by typing the address mouchette.org into a browser, one finds four orchids, or four roses arranged in a grid, cropped and in close proximity with their sex organs full frontal. Or rather, the same orchid, or the same rose repeated four times in poor resolution. The lower two frames are truncated by the inside edge of the browser window, the top right flower also cropped on its far side. Their palette is all pinks, whites, purples, oranges and reds, over which hovers a single static fly (figure 3.1) and two ants perambulating in jitters that trace again and again the same pixels. At the top left-hand corner of the screen, outlined in red, a rectangular profile image. Most often this shows a young girl in a striped jumper, her eyes downcast and surrounded by what we might take to be garden or woodland flowers (figure 3.3). To the right of the image a series of descending tick boxes inform us that this is Mouchette, that she lives in Amsterdam, is nearly thirteen years old and an artist. At the very bottom of the page a centrally placed text box encourages the user to ‘browse me’.

This encounter with the online manifestation of the heroine of Robert Bresson’s 1967 film and the novels of Georges Bernanos has been available to anyone who knew where to look for almost twenty-five years. If there was any doubt as to the connection with the young girl whose story ends in sexual abuse and suicide, it is at once assuaged by clicking on the speech bubble which appears when the mouse touches on the portrait. The link takes the viewer to a bulletin board, where responses to the question ‘What is the best way to kill yourself when you're under 13?’ are arranged in a table which records the date of their submission and the handle of the user supplying the suggestion. By way of example, figure 3.2 is a screenshot showing the responses sent in over December 2018. Even more explicitly, at the time of writing, clicking on the ants takes the user to a black screen from which there is no through passage. Here the movement of the cursor is trailed by a pornographic GIF of acts whose consensuality is left ambiguous. When one clicks on the fly, the next page presents a grainy half-
eaten plate of food (figure 3.5), the fly is no longer static. Tracking it down closes the image, another black ground descends overwritten by text which asks why you, the user, have killed Mouchette (figures 3.6 and 3.7). Back on the landing page described above (figure 3.1), the ‘browse me’ box offers links to the sections that constitute the basic architecture of the site, organised into: m.org.ue / 7 songs / dead fly / Lullaby / cat / Flesh&Blood / suicide kit / birthday / Trademark / film quiz / fan-club / secret / striped penis / I love mouchette / dummy / My Shop / About Me / paintings / Triple X / Tokyo / blind shells / name / wattlechick. 24

Each of these sections are accessible via a labyrinthine infrastructure of links that solicits the viewer into actions which, operating according to the playful suspension of metaphorical distance, between clicking and touching, offers the user the promise of navigating Mouchette as a body. Punning on the language of new media, particularly the metaphors of the graphical user interface, the move encourages us to entertain the analogy of Web browsing as a form of intersubjective exploration. 25 There is a commitment to the joke which can be measured by the way the artist, Martine Neddam, still uses hypertext mark-up language (HTML) to code the site. As the language which built the early Web, HTML is deployed as a gesture toward preserving a sense of open possibility as to the limits of what could be constructed by its affordances. When the frequency of software updates causes certain sections of the site to break down Neddam chooses not to migrate her content. Instead, she laboriously adjusts the code in its original language to make it fit the new programming format. The consequences of this refusal to update range across the site, from the incidental tiling of

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24 Having been shut down in 2002 after litigation proceedings were brought by Marie-Madeleine van der Mersch, Bresson’s widow, the reprised ‘film quiz’ sections contains a link to a surrogate site hosting trivia questions about the film.
flowers on the homepage (originally there was only one image) to discordant obtrusions of noise, from the poverty of resolution in the page where a fly hovers over a plate of food to the way things temporarily disappear entirely from the site.\footnote{26} Previously Neddam has also relinquished her authorship to users. Of a piece with the site’s commitment to anonymity as a condition of collective endeavour, of its repudiation of fixed identity, users were provided with permissions to make alterations in designated sections. In Neddam’s words this all adds up to something like an ethics. Indeed she considers the site to be a ‘keeper of the memory of a time when social change was inscribed in the use of the Web’.\footnote{27} This ‘transformational potential’ was parsed by fellow net.artists Shulgin and Natalie Bookchin as the ‘revolutionary changes in subjectivity and love resulting from new modes of communication’ ushering in ‘a fundamentally new paradigm in interpersonal relationships [that] show evidence of a radically new mode of human exchange’.\footnote{28}

The website, whose authorship Neddam concealed until 2010, has come to occupy a privileged position in the annals of net.art, appearing regularly in the few anthologies, syllabi, survey exhibitions and online archives that preserve its now marginal position in late twentieth-century art.\footnote{29} It serves

\footnote{26} Of the homepage, each flower image’s dimensions correspond to the original 800 x 600 pixel size of a standard browser screen in the mid-1990s. Whilst this ‘effect’ of the screen was subsequent to the page’s conception it does not, I would suggest, deter the associations I claim later on. What is underlined by these features is the way in which the work offers no stable viewing position wherein the work’s central thesis might find a more secure place in time. Instead, the logic of accretion works retroactively on the more minor acts which compose the site.

\footnote{27} In correspondence with the artist.


this chapter as a representational object for some of the assumptions that made up a major strain in that art’s discourse on identity, its concerns for the subject’s discordance with, and hoped for evacuation from, given categories of gender, race and class. In this context, the site’s offer to be unfastened into anonymity can be read as an allusion to a liberatory free movement between subject positions, suicide and child pornography can appear merely as taboos through which the subject emancipated from history breaks. Whilst these ideas far exceeded the parameters and proclivities of net.artists, within its alternative social field the Web could be freely envisioned as a technology which changes the very basis of the subject’s future constitution – materially, psychically, politically, historically; as a consummate technical support for the transformation of subjectivity.

This is the memory Neddam pledges mouchette.org to keep. Crucial to which is the peculiar status and condition of the work as, in the artist’s terms, ‘live’. ‘Live’ strikes me an instructive and suggestive term in the circumstances, one which I first want to consider in relation to the maintenance work described above which would constitute something approximate to its practice of living. There is a discernible ambivalence here in the way that these efforts leave their mark, sedimenting into a sort of palimpsest that both preserves and contaminates the original design which, nonetheless, retains its sovereignty, its charge. What is kept alive by this practice is at once a subject position, a figuration, a character, a set of political perspectives addressed to a future which has been outrun by our present. Emerging strongly from the work’s historical relation is an asynchrony that is always shifting, distorting the link between intention and context that would usually inform the critical interpretation of an artwork. Liveness, in this sense, gets in the way, there is no one point from which mouchette.org can be assessed or delimited. But liveness is also a term which suggests a degree of responsiveness to the world that is absented by Neddam’s fidelity to the work’s opening gambit. If we are to think of liveness as a state of action, the work is still articulating what it set out to say. In so doing the project risks its earnest declarations to a good deal of distortion, to the inversion of its horizons. Instead of looking outward to a
world that might be, it is fixed only on its origins. What must have seemed once like fantastical affordances have become encumbrances; links stop working, mastery breaks down. Sticking to liveness appears as a resistance to the change that existing through time entails. Yet this strange temporal status, which I conceive as a kind of an un-live liveness, is central to the premise set up by the work; signposting, before one even encounters the site, a set of previous lives which have found a home at this particular ‘address’.

Born in Oran in North Western Algeria, Neddam studied in Lyon, London and Paris but by the time mouchette.org went online, she had been living in Amsterdam for two years. Still, Mouchette is a character that refers to a particularly French lineage of cultural and intellectual production and is drawn to surrealist history not just by virtue of her first appearances in Bernanos’ novels of 1926 and 1937 but also through Bresson’s own association with the movement. From the first, in Bernanos’ *Sous le soleil de Satan*, Mouchette is aimed at a particular figuration of masculinity, sent out to expose the turmoil into which the war and its aftermaths had pitched masculine bourgeois self-assurance. And whilst the name is taken by Neddam, rather that conferred, as was the case for the eighteen-year-old Nadine Nortier cast in the title role by Bresson (and described by him as ‘the most awkward little girl I could find’), Mouchette remains in cyberspace a kind of place-holder for an unnerving feminine sexuality as a site of violence. The ‘little fly’ who is forever driven to extinguishing her short lives was introduced by Bernanos as a sixteen-year-old girl whose suicide follows a confessional punctuated by murder, affairs and a still birth. Two years younger in the subsequent *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette* (1937), an unmoored and abused protagonist plunges to her death in a local pond after having been raped. It is to this disconsolate conclusion of the latter story – the one taken up by Bresson, in which there is no equivalent for the redemptive Abbé Donissan to whom Mouchette had confessed her sins in *Sous le soleil de Satan* – that Bernanos refers the crisis of

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30 The site has both English and French language versions.
masculinity and paternal law to the receding power of the church and established social hierarchies.

In the entry on the New Museum’s Rhizome archive of the most influential net.art projects there is, as is the case elsewhere, no mention of mouchette.org’s engagement with any interwar intellectual environment in France nor to a renewed interest in surrealism at the time the site went live. Neddam’s recuperation of this period’s claim on her present within the context of net.art has been conclusively, if strangely, overlooked in its reception. Instead, what counts in these readings of mouchette.org is the site’s coherence within net.art’s then current thematics; a set of concerns with collective production, anonymity, the embodied and the immaterial which, broadly speaking, held to more pervasive convictions about what these technologies implicated for a newly expanded field for art’s experiments. One could be tempted to interpret this absence as one small but significant instance symptomatic of what Claire Bishop, in a much contested article, complained of as the ‘digital divide’ which segregated art made on the internet from certain other currents in art discourse. My contention here is that mouchette.org badly needs to be appreciated in light of the manifest, if complex, relations to surrealism it engenders.

Opening to mouchette.org’s overlooked dialogue with surrealism also opens the work to another conceptual iteration of horizontality. From this other horizontal, the texts I nominate are first Hal Foster’s Compulsive Beauty (1993) and The Return of the Real (1996) as well as Rosalind Krauss and Yves Alain Bois’ exhibition catalogue Formless: A Users Guide (1996/1997) and Krauss’ own earlier Optical Unconscious (1993). There are two initial points to make about the selection of these particular books;

32 We might also add Vision and Visuality, edited by Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), which documents the DIA symposia at which gathered some of the most eloquent articulations of these questions (including sections of Rosalind Krauss’ Optical Unconscious, as well as Foster’s own ‘Armor Fou’, and ‘Obscene Abject Traumatic’ which first appeared in October (78, 1996, 106-124) before re-publication in The Return of the Real.
the first is the relation in which they stand to what Foster called surrealism’s ‘past repression and present recovery’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s, or more specifically, dissident Bataillean surrealism, and the second is the investment they make in horizontality as a term of subjectivity. Krauss’s project is to disrupt the way we see modernist visuality unfold onto our present, to destabilise its hierarchies of sense and the sensible. Bataille’s formless is essential here, disrupting the very coherence of form in its relationship to instituted meaning. In this account the plane of the formless, the horizontal, is pledged against the psychic supports on which dominant, vertical, accounts of art’s development depend. In the surrealist imaginary Foster sketches the question of fascism is ever present, haunting his enquiry with an urgency that seems to stem not just from the latter’s often uneasy intimacy with certain surrealist episodes. Rather, the urgency of Foster’s question, whether certain bodies of surrealist practice ‘partake in a fascist imaginary’, are tethered, most explicitly in his essay Armor Fou, to the ‘military-industrial reconfiguration of the body’ which has made its claim on his present. Thus, remembering television coverage of the Gulf War in The Return of the Real, he writes of a ‘techno-sublime’ before which, ‘in a classic fascistic trope, my body, my subjecthood was affirmed in the destruction of other bodies’. The psychic mechanism he is concerned to track, from CNN to surrealism, is predicated on the relation between the masculine body and the machine as one in which pathological subjectivity emerges through a dialectic of expulsion and encasement on the frontier of self and other. Night after night during the Gulf War Foster recognises the way the body’s imbrication with new technologies seemed to propagate a certain quality of psychic experience. Thus Foster launches his enquiry

33 Foster, Compulsive Beauty, p. xi.
34 Foster’s alarm at the ‘military-industrial reconfiguration of the body’ in the spectacle of the Gulf War might be thought through the afterlives of that conflict’s technological innovations. Only a month after its carnage was claimed as a victory by the United States, the Battle of 73 Easting was re-enacted by its surviving combatants for virtual simulation in the SIMNET training programme which developed technologies subsequently incorporated by VR hardware and, latterly, massive multiplayer online games. See Kevin Kelly, Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. 198-220. Further, it was during and in response to the Gulf War that John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt produced their influential theses on cyberwar, texts which influenced both net.artist and hacktivist group the Electronic Disturbance
into the dissident surrealist imaginary – haunted and haunting as it is with a dangerous intimacy to modernism’s most infamous ‘antitype’ – with an emphasis on dream-work, free association and hysteria as keys with which to open onto the aesthetic order of fascism in the present.

Very often one’s encounter with mouchette.org can appear directed by a principle of association. The flow of pages, which are really pathways of images, propositions and exercises, follow a discordant but still half legible narrative logic; a fly hovers on a plate of food then around a dead body, clicking on the word ‘Amsterdam’ on the landing page delivers a photograph of a block of flats. The sequences are not un-dream-like. But the sense of fluidity or the apparently unruly spontaneity dream sequences afford is regularly intercepted on the site by the juxtaposition of fragments which frustrate the experience of navigation. For example, sometimes clicking on a certain icon or location on the page will lead to another very particular place. If you do this a few times you get to know the route and some of its diversions; in other words, you feel like you have got a handle on how it adds up, that you have started mapping. At other times however, the path leads elsewhere, back to where you started or simply to a blank page. You might find out, if you persevere, that the pathway you were trying to find now sets off from another undisclosed starting point. The dead ends, the reversals back to where one started, the limitations of its architecture and the breakdown of its code, ensure that the intrepid user keeps getting stuck on mouchette.org. One finds the ‘back’ button indispensable. But in these moments of entrapment one can’t help but register the feeling that things are unfurling coercively, that what appears impulsive has long congealed into a formula, that associations are only performed as free. In a sense this is how the unconscious works – coincidence and chance are really anything but. Relatedly, there is also something in this functioning which recalls the pattern of regression in which the subject is called back to a past moment, a position, which they

Theatre’s floodnet software and indeed the alt-right’s gaming of our more recent culture wars.
cannot get free of. Such moments impede being fully in the present and accepting its realities: one always finds oneself back where one started. All this can be found in the way the work is experienced, one which requires that we engage this Mouchette by moving through ideas about time and space which can be parsed in psychoanalytic terms. For it is in the manner that one navigates mouchette.org that many of its most difficult relations to the past, present and future of its making emerge. What I venture to call un-live liveness is an attempt to cover the way what one does on mouchette.org and what one sees there is underpinned by a logic of repetition and, ultimately, resistance – a point of intractability lodged in the work that jars against the optimistic pronouncements it makes elsewhere.

Thinking the quality of experience the work supplies through a return to surrealism would seem to make sense. Surrealism’s experiments with Freudian ideas, in particular with the state and the status of dreaming, provides a ready analogy by which mouchette.org’s treatment of cyberspace as psychic space is enriched. But if enriched then perhaps compromised too. For what I have un-innocently, and rather reductively, called the navigation of the site is, by mouchette.org’s own terms, the charting of a highly determined body – it is part of Neddam’s game, surely, that Mouchette is made a domain name, a frontier plot available for ownership. But one can also see how such a strategy folds neatly onto the surrealist enquiry of psychic states that used the feminine body as a map and a compass as well as a terrain. Of the many models surrealism provides for this kind of set up, prominent among them are the mannequins Andre Masson entered to the international surrealist exhibition of 1938.35 By this point woman’s place as a blank canvas for masculine desire and dread in surrealist methodology as much as mythology had gone well past cliché.36

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35 Masson’s lifeless conglomerates of consumption, as Mignon Nixon writes, bear ‘witness to surrealism’s retreat from an earlier revolutionary politics’. Nixon presses the point: ‘these figures appeared as surrealism’s most vacuous variations on the theme of the female body as symbol of desire and dread’. Nixon, Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 58.
36 Ibid.
On mouchette.org the menu of options on the landing page, the tiling of images and the Flesh&Blood quadrants are all arranged into table or grid like structures. The body is separated into part objects – the tongue, the ear, the eye (figure 3.9) – that play upon the metonymic structure of the fetish, riffing, perhaps, off Dali’s *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy* (figure 3.10), published, like Hans Bellmer’s *poupées* in Bataille’s *Minotaur* (figure 3.12). Dali’s reference point for *The Phenomenon* was, famously, Jean-Martin Charcot’s *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*. As Georges Didi-Huberman has demonstrated in his extraordinary monograph on these folios, the tableau provided a consummate organizing form for the scientific gaze photography promised to supply. We need to note here that the visualization of hysteria Charcot pursued through photography, and in whose tracks surrealists like Dali and Breton followed, diverges radically from a Freudian methodology. Where Charcot’s indefatigable commitment to the ‘psychiatric authority of sight’ privileged photographic and museological procedures of classification which muted his patients, Freud’s project was oriented, through his own collections of dreams and jokes, not to looking but listening. The operations Freud was concerned with – including those of dreamwork – were predicated on a fundamental turning away from the surface of the image so as to give space to the imaginary. Furthermore, as Didi-Huberman lays out, the records of this intensive photographic construction of the hysterical body mapped a reciprocal

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37 In a different direction to my argument here, one might also think, given we are reflecting on the inheritances of surrealist thought, of the ‘imaginary anatomy’ Lacan describes as the *corps morcelé*. As I discuss in the next chapter, such ‘images appear in dreams, as well as fantasies’, wherein the body is shown ‘as having a mosaic structure’, or like a ‘jig-saw puzzle’ with it separate parts ‘in disorderly array’ and ‘eccentric positions.’ These descriptions come in Lacan’s paper on the ego crucial both to Foster’s discussion of the Gulf war and, as we will see, Mary Kelly’s *Gloria Patri*. Lacan, ‘Some Reflections on the Ego’, p. 13.

38 He writes: ‘This tabulation would then be an exact “portrait” of “the” illness, to the extent that it could lay out, in a very visible way, just what the history of an illness (with its remissions, its concurrent or percurrent causes) tended to conceal’. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. by Alisa Hartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 25.

39 Didi-Huberman, p. 247. Not long after his stay at the Salpêtrière, Freud tellingly observed: ‘[Charcot] was not a reflective man, not a thinker: he had the nature of an artist – he was, as he himself said, a visual, a man who sees’. Freud, ‘Charcot’, 1893, in *SE*, vol. iii, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1962), pp. 7-23 (p. 12).
relation between ‘the fantasy of hysteria and the fantasy of knowledge’. The very reproduction of the image involved a ‘connivance’ or ‘collusion’ that can be considered a form of transference. In this sense, the women acting in the Salpêtrière’s spectacular theatre of hysteria were performing a pathology that was not at all their sole production: the feminine body, the photographic body, became the site of a projection by which hysteria was intertwined with a technological apparatus.

In regard to this familiar gendering of hysteria it might be mentioned that in the most publicised and long lasting of the ruses by which Neddam concealed her identity as Mouchette she deployed as a decoy a middle-aged man. Given that cyberculture, like surrealism, comprised a collection of overlapping groups predominated by men this seems significant in that one can see by this move a play on masculinity as the given position of both authorship and spectatorship. For the surrealists neither of these positions were credibly available to women. Instead the proper place of women in surrealist circles was to be the embodiment of a hysterical ideal, to be fixated on as a conduit for repressed material and, in the ideal ‘type’, to perform the scene of a young girl’s suicide. Of course, Mouchette is a past master of suicide, she has practised and executed the task many times before and across several media. Bresson renders the act memorably in a scene taken from the end of Bernanos’ novel when Mouchette rolls not once but three times down a hill before committing herself to the depths of the lake it banks (figure 3.13). The act is presaged by the preceding scene in which she watches the paroxysms of a rabbit that has just been shot. The creature’s

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40 Didi-Huberman, p. xi.
41 In the first instance the artist’s friend, René Paul Vallentgoed, posed as a poetry agent representing a thirteen-year-old Mouchette. Later, at a 2003 event at Postmasters Gallery in New York, an anonymous French artist Neddam had recently met took the place of the website’s creator, leading Rachel Greene, in her Internet Art edition of Thames and Hudson’s World of Art series, to attribute mouchette.org to ‘him’ (Green, Internet Art, p. 115). These episodes would further a resemblance one is tempted to draw between Mouchette and the young Salpêtrière hysterical Augustine, the ‘star’ of Charcot’s Iconographie. In the proclamation of hysteria as the ‘greatest poetic discovery of the nineteenth-century’, the surrealists lauded the ‘delicious’ Augustine as ‘the perfect type’. Raped by an older man at the age of 13, she eventually escaped the hospital by disguising herself as a man and so depriving Charcot of his ‘masterpiece’, his ‘living work of art.’ Didi-Huberman, pp. 148, 122.
manic throes and pirouettes appear to be played, identically, twice.\(^{42}\) Of course, the footage of the rabbit, it turns out, is not played twice. On closer inspection the bullet hole lays open from the start of the second sequence. It is merely that the effect of the rabbit rising from death to perform a set of movements so similar to those which it has just made produces an uncanny choreographic effect, inferring as it does, a traumatic doubling associated with the re-animation of that which is thought dead.\(^{43}\) With the immediately subsequent lakeside scene, the rabbit’s death dance is reformulated as in some way a precipitative of the latter act, one which Nortier rehearses in turn on the grassy bank; the rabbit’s death confirms the fate hidden in the girl’s name.

There are certain points at which mouchette.org makes you jump. Sounds irrupt suddenly as the user moves about the sections. This is how speech works on the website; by a fly tagged with a text box declaring ‘it’s me, by a tiny collection of pixels that make a buzzing sound, by a woman’s moan as one enters the site. Originally deployed to engage the user whilst the new screen loaded, these sonic intrusions operate according to the logic Neddam extends across the site; the picture of a cat makes a noise like a cat because it is a cat, just like clicking on mouchette.org means touching Mouchette. In describing the reciprocity between male hysteria and its surrealist objects, Foster connects surrealism’s social and spatial confusion with the way the masculine subject is ‘rendered hysterical’ by the force of the feminine object’s hysterical beauty.\(^{44}\) Yet, curiously, this rendering is only ‘in effect’. Hysteria does manifest itself through effects but to restrict the symptom to the level of effect is to leave its pathological formation, especially at the level of sexuality, un-enquired. If we play along with Neddam’s joke and listen to the sounds of mouchette.org on her terms, they echo the regressive mode of performative speech that Mitchell situates ‘on the cusp of

\(^{42}\) This scene is largely Bresson’s invention, extrapolated from a passage in Bernanos’ novel where ‘at that moment, the deep, secret impulse towards death seized her again. It was so violent that she was almost dancing with anguish, like an animal caught in a trap’. Georges Bernanos, Mouchette, trans. by J. C. Whitehouse (New York: New York Review of Books, 1937/2007), p. 123.

\(^{43}\) See Krauss, ‘Uncanny’ in Krauss and Bois, pp. 192-197.

\(^{44}\) Foster, Compulsive Beauty, p. 191.
metaphor’.45 Beyond this limit is the capacity to conceive difference and distance – a place that we emerge into from a terrible confusion of literalism. But getting there requires us to witness, mourn and then recreate the loss of something symbolically. The absence of an object, which is compulsively worked through in so many endless games of peek-a-boo or hide-and-seek, is thus crucial in being able to describe the indescribable, to say something in terms of something else, to acknowledge the gaps between word and object. If siblings are critical agents in this process – the child is able to make symbolic equations from the novel proposition that two unlikes (baby and toddler) can nevertheless be alike (siblings) – then the threshold of metaphor can also be posited as a waystation back to, and beyond, which we might regress laterally.46 ‘At this stage of development’, Mitchell writes, ‘a particular word is a particular thing’.47

What I find helpful about thinking sound on mouchette.org as hysterical speech is that it connects with the way these noises are always oriented towards an invitation. Almost every section encourages the viewer into one kind of ludic exercise or another – whether submitting poems for a poem generator, spotting a ‘striped penis’ amongst a photograph of garish soft toys bearing Mouchette’s name, squashing a fly or chasing after dancing skeletons. Each of which brings the user into a relation with Mouchette, or Neddam, or the site’s other users, that is underpinned by a consistent indeterminacy. As I have already mentioned, for a time Neddam offered users the opportunity to take over the role of Mouchette, adjusting and contributing content to the site. The body of mouchette.org becomes in this sense ‘more me’ – an object of a more serious type of play through which one explores the boundary between self and other, it becomes a device that

46 Mitchell, Siblings, p. 149.
47 Ibid.
makes available several subject positions. Mouchette herself plays a double role, by turns passive – the ground on which the game is played – whilst also its master – she holds all the cards, she has coded the rules. Because of her anonymity one is never sure, at the level of participation, who else is playing – who the ‘you’, ‘we’ or ‘I’ is. But when one finds a fulsome record of the submissions fellow players have submitted, there is a reminder of the way games in surrealist circles so often played out on the edge of masculine anxiety and sadism.

mouchette.org was developed through the artist’s experiences on a multi-user domain (MUD) called LAMBDAmoo where she first deployed the character as her avatar. In the way users gathered to construct text-based worlds that seemed to confirm the Web’s early promise of new alternative realities built and populated by avatars which erased the marks of gender or race or class, these platforms afforded experiments in group illusion. As Wendy Chun observed, MUDs spawned a heady body of analysis which aimed to ‘cement Foucault’s claim that sexuality was fast becoming discursive and every angst-ridden-boy passing as the girl of your dreams proved that gender is performative’. Most MUDs offered users the choice of more than two genders, seemingly on the conviction that they might provide a vehicle for the kind of ethical experimentation aimed at by the invitation to stand in another’s shoes. Describing a user’s first experience of these communities in 1996, the psychologist Sherry Turkle wrote of how one would ‘cross a boundary into a highly charged territory. Some feel an uncomfortable sense of fragmentation, some a sense of relief. Some sense the possibilities of self-discovery, even self-transformation’.

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48 One might want to make Lyn Hershman Leeson’s Dollie Clone series (1995-1998) an important reference point here. Not only could Leeson’s animatronic dolls be remotely inhabited by users, the artist described these avatars precisely as her ‘evil twins’.
That Neddam was and remains highly invested in the ‘possibilities of self-
discovery, even self-transformation’ – she considers them essential to her
work – might be held in mind when visiting the Flesh&Blood section of
mouchette.org. It is in areas such as this that we are reminded most
clearly, not just of the surrealist’s characterization of hysteria as a medium
of ‘reciprocal seduction’, but of what moving between identities and subject
positions risks. For it is here and on the suicide board that one is
confronted more directly with the contradiction I suggest is essential for
apprehending what the site has to do with the alt-right. A scanned image of
the artist’s tongue (figure 3.8), a part of her anatomy chosen to conceal any
markers of age, is accompanied by text that reads ‘Finally, I can come that
close to you / Do you also want to come that close to me?’ Click through
this flesh and you find yourself confronted by another grid of throbbing
meat where we are told that ‘of course I got my parent’s permission for all
the web portraits’. Thus, against the mobility of subject positions Neddam
celebrates elsewhere, the specificity of the fantasy object and its
transgressive possibilities is returned to the interface with her user. While
there is space here to tell Mouchette ‘what you think my tongue tastes like’,
a more substantial catalogue of responses to this encounter is to be found on
the pages of the suicide board, that section of the website where answers to
the inaugural question ‘What is the best way to kill yourself when you’re
under 13?’ are stored and to which submissions dating back to December
1997 can be found. On the suicide board one starts to get a grip on the ways
this exquisite corpse has become the product of a sustained solicitation with

52 For discussions of passing in early online forums see Lisa Nakamura, ‘Race in/for
Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet’,
<http://www.humanities.uci.edu/mposter/syllabi/readings/nakamura.html> [accessed 2
February 2018] and Sandy Stone, The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the
53 Louis Aragon and André Breton, quoted in C. F. B. Miller, ‘Surrealism’s Homophobia’,
October, 173 (2020), 207-229 (p. 212). The phrase is drawn, again, from the issue of La
Révolution surréaliste which celebrated hysteria’s fiftieth birthday cited in this chapter, p.
133 n. 41.
54 It is also through this page that we find the only reference to Mouchette’s parents on the
site. Neddam presents close-ups of raw meat over which are laid phrases such as ‘My dad
lets me do everything I want on the web, as long as I stay behind the monitor screen’ and
‘My mother asked me what part of her body I represented but I could not give an answer’. 
the projections of a masculinity mouchette.org archives. The movement from the theme of sex to self-murder that ties these two parts of the site reflects brutally in the suggestions gridded in a bulletin board that organises the sheer persistence of erotised violence displaced onto the site, content which is thereby ennobled by inclusion in a collaborative, and still live, performance.

What concerns me is the way in which this content, and how and why it is produced on this site, is so often elided in discussions of the project. Across the literature on mouchette.org, and net.art more broadly, there is a welcome emphasis on form, on the conditions that underwrite what the medium can do and say. Left aside from these discussions is any consideration of the relationship between the power relations set up by new Web technologies – especially at the level of gender and race – and the way in which the last twenty-four years, and the last ten in particular, have evolved the way we understand the Web in relation to these problems. At some point this dislocation entails that in guarding the wishful optimism to which Neddam ties the architecture of the site, its material condition, mouchette.org closes an eye to the very social conditions that architecture was first engaged to address. For this is what Mouchette offers as an avatar; a body that refuses to age – an apt site for a shrine to an unrealised future. One encounters prescience most strongly in those areas where mouchette.org re-inscribes into the very fabric of the site what she elsewhere would appear to renounce.

One of the many strengths in Krauss and Bois’ elaboration of Bataille’s formless is the insistence that what is at stake is a whole system of how meaning is made, and, perhaps more importantly, how it is unmade. For Bataille, the horizontal is a condition of the formless and its operations. It stands diametrically opposed to the vertical that constructs the gestalt out of ‘figures of coherence, balance, and wholeness’ expressed through the symmetrical formulation ‘phallic-unity-as-gestalt-as-cognitive-unity’.55 In

55 Krauss, ‘Gestalt’ in Formless, pp. 89-92 (pp. 89, 92).
guaranteeing the ‘very generation of meaning’ the vertical orientation corresponds with the vertical posture, tying the sensory to the sensible and privileging the optical as the dominant perceptual apparatus in the construction of knowledge.\textsuperscript{56} In as much as the vertical in this account corresponds with Freud’s story in \textit{Civilization and its Discontents} of man’s erection to a vertical posture, and thus from animality to bourgeois sensibility hinged on the prone genital, the formless reads it backwards. It reverses the process of sublimation and returns the senses to their concordance with the genital and the anal. Tastes, smells and sounds know of no precise shapes. Bresson’s Mouchette, the little fly, in this sense also resists verticality. She cannot be contained by the structures and institutions of social life in the village; she goes to live in the woods, she rolls around in the mud and the grass, she is named after an insect whose destiny is to be squished or snuffed out – to become inchoate. And mouchette.org too is interested in alternative ways of perceiving the world, how we apprehend and makes sense out of it. Which, in a way that bears down on the very aspiration of the work’s motivation, is why the character’s cosmetic legibility to such operations as the formless in a project set out to describe the apparently immanent transformation of subjective experience is of issue.

Inasmuch as the world one perceives describes a relation to a point of view, a spatial and psychic dimension, it is a primary question of subjectivity. What we might call the ethos of mouchette.org is imbued by the notion of world making or rather remaking. By ethos, I mean the collection of a set of practices through which a conviction flows toward sustaining an investment

\textsuperscript{56} One could take the rabbit scene, along with another in Bresson’s film in which an unknown and unexplained character with a child walks though the fairground and gives the protagonist a coin with which she is able to afford her ride on the bumper cars, as legible to Krauss’ thesis. Both trouble the ‘good gestalt’ and the pre-eminence of visual knowledge for which it stands to the extent that they appear to refer to something that the viewer cannot quite make sense of either in regard to what is shown nor reconcile with the codes of narrative and form by which the film is approached as interpretable. The same applies with another disruptive mode Krauss explores. The pulse, which, evoking the fort/da fort/da rhythm of the bobbin in \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle} indexes the insistent intrusion of a death drive. Here it might be located not so much in the violent pulsation of the rabbit’s throes but rather as an ‘upsurge of extreme violence’ that links the creature’s dance to the next scene moments later when Mouchette rolls twice then three times down a hill before entering the lake. Krauss, ‘Pulse’, in ibid., pp. 161-165 (pp. 163, 164).
in a social and political possibility. That possibility, vaulting in its ambition, aimed at an ill-defined liberation of the subject. It was, or at least thought of itself, as an emancipatory if not revolutionary project. Yet, as in so many instances when reflecting on this peculiar work, such conviction is abruptly thrown off course. As we have seen, this liberation of the subject depends for its narrative on transgressions which carry with them the undertow of domination: woman as a ground fully available to ownership; masculine projection; the immanence of sexual violence along familiar lines of otherness even as, to borrow language popular at the time, bodies of flesh disintegrated into fragments of data.\(^57\) The question then occurs, What does this ambivalence do to the work of world-making we survey on the site? It might seem that resolving the question of whether Neddam breaks free of the model of gender surrealism supplies, that is, whether Neddam contests or keeps intact the construction of femininity as a projection of masculine hysteria, would be critical for making any definitive claim as to what it is that mouchette.org is telling us about the intersubjective conditions of early online experience.

Relatedly, a problem that Foster, Krauss and Bois, albeit different ways, identify is whether certain art of their early to middle 1990s present or the surrealist past accords with Bataille’s characterisation of transgressions which do not deny or offend taboo but rather affirm it all the more forcefully.\(^58\) By the way that Bataille winds the political and the psychoanalytic valence of the term regression around the same stake, the

\(^{57}\) For the influential Web theorist Arthur Kroker, ‘the hypertexted body [is] the precursor of a new world of multi-media politics, fractalized economies, incept personalities, and (cybernetically interfaced) relationships […] the hypertexted body is the Internet equivalent of the Paris Commune: anarchistic, utopian, and in full revolt against the suppression of the general (tele-) human possibilities of the Net’. Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein, ‘The Hyper-Texted Body, Or Nietzsche Gets A Modem’ 1994’, <http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/the-hyper-texted-body-or-nietzsche-gets-a-modem> [accessed 11 July 2019].

\(^{58}\) In a much-noted passage of The Return of the Real Foster writes: ‘infantilist personae tend to perform at times of cultural-political reaction, as ciphers of alienation and reification. Yet these figures of regression can also be figures of perversion, that is, of pèreversion, of a turning from the father that is a twisting of his law’. Foster, The Return of the Real, p. 160. Krauss reserves her concluding essay of Formless for addressing the contemporary vogue for abjection precisely to distinguish these postures from Bataille’s project.
question lets onto another that Foster poses at several points in *Amor Fou*: ‘But what has all this got to do with fascism?’ It seems worth venturing toward an answer at this point too. Or at least to rephrase the question more specifically as What has all this got to do with the relation between the fascism Foster is concerned with and the ways in which that subjectivity might be located in the conditions of online sociality as they emerged and were imagined in the early to middle 1990s? To what extent does the trope of male hysteria as it is read through surrealism connect to these conditions and their relation to reactionary political currents in our own present? To think in this direction means considering how it is the pathological becomes conditional of the social. It also requires us to risk that alluring convergence of political and psychoanalytic vocabularies.

The model I want to use here is provided by Foster’s analysis of Hans Bellmer’s *poupées*, the objects which most intimately link surrealism to the ‘fascism, which it anticipates, partially collaborates with, mostly contests’. For Foster, and, one fancies, on some level Neddam too, Bellmer’s *poupées* provide a ‘summa’ of surrealism’s most urgent thematics and therefore imply an suggestive point of reference for Neddam’s dialogue with the *femme enfant*. Fiercely anti-Oedipal, the project has been recognised as a revolt against Bellmer’s national socialist father in which the son deployed the engineer’s tools of his father’s own trade, albeit with the help of his brother and the inspiration of his cousin. Through the *poupées* the artist

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60 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, p. 189.
61 An observation on which there is not time to dwell sufficiently here is that the personal circumstances through which Bellmer’s *poupées* have been compellingly diagnosed as in Oedipal revolt against, are legible on another, lateral, axis. Whilst the role of Ursula Naguschewski, Bellmer’s young cousin is often surfaced in these accounts, Mitchell’s sibling works allows for her lateral relation to Bellmer to be theorised. As his writings make clear, Bellmer’s brother is an essential collaborator in the artist’s Oedipal games. In his short biographical essay, *The Father* (1936), Bellmer even dissolves the personal pronoun into a ‘we’. Further, at the time Bellmer attended the famous Max Reinhardt production of Offenbach’s *Tales of Hoffman* which precipitates the construction of his first dolls, it is not just his father who falls ill but another figure on the lateral axis, Bellmer’s wife, who contracts the tuberculosis from which she will soon die – an event which will send the artist into a classically hysteric illness. Of the wife, the brother and the young cousin, the first provides the traumatic event, the second the technological assistance in constructing the dolls and the third the erotic inspiration.
reaches back to infancy, to an ‘enchanted garden’ envisioned, quite literally, in the scenes the photographs survey as a past world which may be engineered back into existence. Although Foster is not explicit about this, the tools Bellmer uses and the trade from which they are drawn are all part of the story he tells through these dolls about the nexus of fascism and fantasy, masculinity and femininity, repression and its release, containment and diffusion. In dialogue with Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*, Foster mobilises the allegory of the masculine body as a carapace guarding against fragmentation to problematise the extreme ambivalence of the male hysteric, overlaying his greatest fear – ‘his own fragmentation, disintegration, and dissolution’ – with ‘his greatest wish’.62

The machine here, the inorganic device, is what protects against anxiety. It is made use of by the fascist (male) subject as an illusion that blocks the psychic fact of subjecthood as a mobile condition, that one can occupy both masculine and feminine positions. The *poupées* illuminated this ambivalence at the level of gender by the twinning of a feminised (passive) masochism and masculinised (active) sadism, each turned around upon the other in fantasy. Yet what Mitchell’s sibling work brings to the feminine identification that is signalled through its violent expulsion in Theweleit’s account of the Freikorps and Foster’s reading of the *poupées*, is a theoretical framework that can elaborate this move as constitutive of the social. Without a lateral model of siblings, without a lateral subjectivity which has its own autonomous place in theory, the feminine identification can only be conceived as a revolt against the father. It has no meaning in and of itself beyond this rejection. So, in ways that open up the claims made of Bellmer in this and other accounts, Mitchell’s privileging of psychic bisexuality as constituent of lateral rather than vertical sexuality, masculinity and femininity rather than man and woman, allows for the sibling, or sibling substitute, to stand as a model for Bellmer’s feminine identification. Psychic

62 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, p. 109. One of the challenges the alt-right provide to thinking the relation between fascism and the machine lies in the way technophilia is oriented not to the machine as carapace – as we see in Foster and Theweleit – but to a set of digital devices and affordances whose connotations are not so much to do with armouring or containing but connecting, of diffusion rather than enclosure.
bisexuality facilitates Bellmer’s identification with his cousin Ursula Naguschewski – it is the spectrum across which he moves from his masculine to feminine position. The resonance with Mitchell’s account of siblings is clear and relates directly to her insistence that, for psychoanalysis, bisexuality is not at all an object choice but rather a subject position. Further, that it is a fact of psychic life given expression by the sibling experience which provides for a lateral movement into someone else’s shoes. As discussed in the previous chapter, the sibling’s highly proximate subject position facilitates a move along the horizontal in which gender is tried on or inhabited rather than given. On the problem of the permeability of boundaries between self and other, Mitchell’s lateral model of sexuality thus approaches, albeit by a different route, the problem so crucial to Foster; that point at which the feminine within, parsed by fascist subjectivity through an economy of violent expulsion and denial, maps so clearly onto Bellmer’s theme of ‘defusion’ that one cannot be read without the other.

It is through the concept of psychic bisexuality, so crucial to Foster’s argument about Bellmer, that Mitchell’s tethers the problem of lateral relations to male hysteria and its projection. For the fragmentation, disintegration and dissolution Foster perceives in the *poupées* are also the features of hysterical crisis Mitchell is determined to untether from femininity. Where Foster reads masculinity ‘rendered hysterical’ by the force of the feminine object’s hysterical beauty, Mitchell theorises the condition as a universal. Relieved from gendering, if not gender, such anxieties of disintegration and fragmentation adhere all the more strongly to the figure of the male hysteric returned to the moment of his dethronement and displacement in early siblinghood. Upon this trauma she describes a splitting of the self in reaction to the threat of ‘annihilation, displacement or dethronement,’ precipitative of a regression aiming precisely at an ‘inchoate

63 This formulation serves to emphasise a crucial feature of Mitchell’s theory inasmuch as it makes clear that the sibling’s sharing of a similar subject position entails that gender is not absolute, whereas in the Oedipus complex it is the dissimilarity of subject position in relation to the parents on which the castration complex, and the psychic representation of sexual difference, depend.
feeling, to a sense of bodily fragmentation’, in other words, ‘his hysterical destiny’. The hysteria must be expelled, projected outward onto another who nevertheless represents a part of the self. Gender matters here, not as a term of strict division but rather at the pre-Oedipal level of bisexuality that the dawning of sexual difference struggles to repress. The persistent drag or later rearing of the unresolved sibling crisis, for which the trope of the feminine-within might stand, is thus both index to, and precipitative of, the regression to a past that is ever present.

It is an irony of mouchette.org that in committing so comprehensively to a vision of future possibility the artist has created a monument to anachronism. What we see now when we visit the site are the fragments of that illusion turned into something else. Like Bellmer’s poupées, mouchette.org has become a motley ensemble of parts. At the joints this wear and tear produces those jarring glitches that are riven across the site, moments which break against the play of movement from scene to scene by which Neddam hoped to allegorise subjectivity liberated from a fixed subject position. The glitches, it seems, have turned what was once a remarkable affordance into a something which is the opposite of mastery. Yet she has long considered the maintenance of the site creative – creation turned into, rather than ‘as’, conservation. Given the image of femininity Neddam preserves on mouchette.org, one could be tempted to think of this conservation in terms of its conservative gesture. This would describe a perspective which seeks to imagine and work back to an original state which might then be frozen or fixed, Gradiva-like, in time. But, as Freud’s analysis of that story reminds us, the object so conserved will inevitably slip out of time and there is much in mouchette.org which would speak to such a dislocation.

Conversely, there is much else that is more accommodating of conservation’s other capacities – conservation as the work of transmission,

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64 Mitchell, Mad Men and Medusas, p. 211, 264.  
65 See Dekker, Collecting and Conserving Net Art, pp. 80-92.
as the recursive practice of limitation or exposure, as a collective endeavour of memory. The conservator and art historian Annette Dekker, following Neddam’s phrase ‘generative preservation’, calls the project a ‘living database’. Conceived as a set of open possibilities, conservation can embrace technical failures – indeed they may become, as they do for Neddam, a component part of the work. To think of conservation through these valences is to see it as acting on time in more varied and creative ways, as a description of a certain way of being with a work that is fully accommodating of the different registers of time in which any given object might speak. It is noteworthy, then, that on mouchette.org an exemplary form of this collaborative conservation – the collective, living archive, should be juxtaposed with the theme of suicide. The suicide board asks the user to offer their fantasies on how a young girl might best kill herself. The display of those others have already prescribed is probably intended more as a record than material for inspiration, yet one wonders how some of these suggestions can be consistent with the more cerebral interpretations we could choose for a phrase like ‘generative preservation’ or ‘creative conservation’. One of the striking things about this part of the site is that, at the nub of the dramatic climax to the Mouchette story, the suicide, Neddam deploys a format which itself seems to encapsulate the project’s more general stance toward its own historicity. For if the suicide board is an archive, the whole site may also be read in that genre. The refusal to let anything disappear, to store everything, to keep hold of everything, betrays a refusal to accept loss that psychoanalysis has linked to the oral and anal stages of infantile development. These are stages of the infant’s life ripe with sadistic and masochistic impulses. The comparison is apt as suicide too represents a refusal to accept the loss of something, even as the subject ultimately loses herself in the act.

Whitney Phillips has documented how, for a number of years before the term alt-right was in circulation, 4chan became a forum for sharing

66 Ibid., p. 93.
67 Ibid., p 145.
borrowed, ironic, or unwittingly earnest suicide fantasies. In her telling it read quite a lot like the suicide board on mouchette.org.\textsuperscript{68} Perversely, suicide – an act of unbinding from the world – helped to affirm group bonds. There is something in this by which we might better see the way that killing, of self or other, always involves a measure of violence directed inwards as well as outwards, that it is, in some important sense an act that is inter-subjective. Breton, we might remember was fond of quoting Theodore Jouffroy’s wry line that ‘suicide is a badly conceived word; the one who kills is not identical to the one who is killed’.\textsuperscript{69} Mitchell also theorises suicide as a social act, implicating in the obverse the killing of another who was too much the same. The intimacy, one might even say indeterminacy, of homicide and suicide thus points to a fundamentally social measure of violence; the way in which the desire for murder of another covers for the violent urges of self-hatred and cruelty the assailant is attempting to deflect or project. For Mitchell, this dynamic finds its origin in the sibling situation. It points to the centrality of violence in the construction of a selfhood and the social, the inaugural cleavage from one who is so much the same and the murderous wish that sits at the heart of the group. If ‘hysteria is itself regression’, it is a pathology which sustains a confusion about that cleavage. For Breton and Mitchell the link between suicide and hysteria is clear, suicide works conceptually as well as psychically between and through objects and subjects. It is an act which both exposes the radical dependency of any subject, the way we live in others as we are peopled by others, whilst also covering for this psychic truth through performing so theatrically an act of only apparent autonomy.

This theme of death is what, for me at least, ultimately connects form and content on mouchette.org. It is there in the resistance to time which, in the end, tends toward obsolescence. For Mouchette, as Neddam is keen to emphasise, is a character entirely embedded in the language of her mediums, dependent on the code, the software, the hardware, the protocol

\textsuperscript{68} See, in particular, Phillips, \textit{This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things}, and Nagle, \textit{Kill All Normies}, pp. 29-37.\textsuperscript{69} Quoted in Foster, \textit{Compulsive Beauty}, p. 14.
and the format. She gets picked up by writers, film makers and artists who are out to play with, rather than just in, their mediums. On this score one could think that the story of Mouchette is used by Neddam to push against the pull of technological obsolescence. *Mouchette.org’s* signal example of how technologies harbour psychic and political investments could be taken as a declaration against the accelerationist thrust of the digital, even as this opposition risks a politics of nostalgia. The psychic affordances of certain devices thus would enter a more complex relation to how we think their afterlives. On this theme Hanna Hölling has recommended Henri Bergson’s notion of duration for thinking temporality through conservation: ‘in duration, the current moment does not depose that which came before’, rather it ‘preserves all its pasts’ in the present and future’. Proposing that artworks offer a means of survival for the past that is preserved not as virtual but as ‘actualized in the present’, this kind of conservation does not embalm its objects so much as make use of them as agents of continuity. Thinking *mouchette.org* along these durational lines would thus chime with how the project might be construed as a practice deeply invested the vulnerability of technological memory and what Dekker calls, ‘networks of care’.

But, again, if *mouchette.org* is to be conceived as an agent of continuity we might want to consider what the site actualises in the present. Getting to the nub of this point requires that we account for the way new technologies inherit the power structures they emerge into, the way they help shape a subjecthood which performs the fantasies of those power structures. For this is precisely what the novel and spectacular affordances of new technologies, from the photography studios of the Salpêtrière to the World Wide Web, are so effective at making invisible. What Neddam’s site articulates now is not just its original statement but that statement’s repetition. (A repetition, the

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71 Ibid.
72 See Dekker, *Collecting and Conserving Net Art*, pp. 71-98.
reader will have noticed, which my analysis has also been unable to break from). What strikes us now is how obstinately, how devoutly, the proposition is guarded. For one can, indeed one cannot but, nurture regression; a set of relations to others defined as such precisely on account of their resistance to change. The term’s temporal and topographical aspects tell us this – they point to a way of seeing the world formed not as it is but as one once wanted it to be. In as far as being closed to variance and difference, one might characterise this way of being in the group as constituted by a negative relationality. But that, ultimately, moves away from the social. 73 I would offer that this is one of the interpretations it is possible to bring to the dream puzzle set up by Mouchette’s name. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud uses the fly as a metaphor for the failure of the censor, for the disturbance in sleep of thoughts we have failed to fully repress. In this way the fly is that which must be transformed by the dream-work, a prospect which requires revision, which needs to be worked over again and again. (We might think here again of Nortier rolling again and again into the lake.) This is certainly the guise Foster gives the fly who squats on the cover of The Return of the Real (figure 3.14). Yet in the plural, in the move from Mouchette to Mouchettes, the girl’s name is transformed, it reads ‘to snuff out’. Thus, in the move from the one to the many, in becoming social, Mouchette shifts from signalling trauma and transgression to spelling death.

Without taking seriously the site’s relation to surrealism, and hence dream-work, these integral aspects remain latent, which is to say, repressed. Similarly, the hysteria which is such a dramatic feature of these relations is erased, naturalised to the conditions of being social online. In surfacing these contents, the work’s relationship to its own past is enriched. For it is in large part due to mouchette.org’s refusal of change that the way we see it

73 I intend ‘negative relationality’ in dialogue with Judith Butler’s recent exposition of a relationality ‘defined in part by negativity, that is, by conflict, anger and aggression’. ‘As a result’, Butler writes, ‘we have to move beyond a conception of relatedness as “a sign of connectedness” or as “an ethical norm” to be posited over and against destruction; rather, relationality is a vexed and ambivalent field’ lit up by ‘a persistent and constitutive destructive potential’. Butler, The Force of Nonviolence, p. 10.
changes. Shaded by the present, the memory which Mouchette is deployed to preserve is, as all memories are, an unreliable witness. The optimism it guards was one thing then and another now, as Neddam’s attempt to maintain the gesture intact forecloses any reflection. In refusing to admit into its picture of the world the tendentiousness of politics, the site turns from making it new to making it old. It conforms to a romanticism of the future of which we might well be wary.\textsuperscript{74} The name Mouchette becomes, in this sense, a deadweight – it ceases to be actively taken and solidifies into a given which marks out a place and position. Trying to live in the forbearance of a moment long passed, to remain committed only to what it promised, is to fix a point on the horizon line of the imagination that freezes thought. It as a funny sort of living that closes to life.

In the ‘group illusion’ Anzieu postulates, time ‘loses its chronological character and becomes reversible, thus allowing for repetition and the eternal return’.\textsuperscript{75} ‘Human beings come to groups as they might come to a utopia’, a place ‘on the other side of the mirror, where the unconscious will at last be represented and realized’.\textsuperscript{76} Just as for the individual in sleep, the group illusion holds together a complex of ideas organised by the operations given agency by a wish and the anxiety which lies behind it. The illusion may be stimulating and paralysing, bewitching or self-destructive but in each case it will signal regression. Against the liberatory narrative of the subject moving beyond its own limits, at the last what mouchette.org’s long coalescence signals rather more apparently from this vantage is that such wishes have indeed become paralysing. The future that never was for Mouchette appears in ever more clarity as the sum of repetition, a present which has, ultimately, been declined.

\textsuperscript{74} The phrase is T. J. Clark’s, borrowed from his critique of the technophilia found, a near one hundred years before mouchette.org went live, in the pages of La Société Nouvelle. T.J. Clark, \textit{Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 95.

\textsuperscript{75} Anzieu, \textit{The Group and the Unconscious}, p. 144.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
To begin with, a story:

He stepped into the box and surveyed the situation with the composure of a veteran. If the first one wasn’t what he wanted, he’d take a strike, but on the second, he’d go with the pitch: inside – pull it, outside – hit to the opposite field. The ball was deep and outside. He moved back and knocked a hard grounder through a gap between third and short. Nice job. Good rap. Way to hustle. And he touched base thinking: Dad should’ve seen this. He was forty and still trying to please his father who loved baseball and hated sissies: still remembering small incidents that grew in proportion to the effort it took to forget them. Small incident, small boy, he was only ten. They dropped him from the team, the VFW, the bastards. He was so ashamed. Could not go in, stood on the porch, could not go in the house, just stood there crying. Standing with one foot on the bag, he waited for the next play. No use running unless he could make it. Sliding and diving were taboo. Timing was everything. Yes, age had affected his reaction time, he thought; that’s how it happened.
Cleaning ham bones and the knife went through his glove, right through the steel mesh, the company armor, his protective clothing. Then, the lethal wound benignly inflicted; he was laid off. A line drive slashed through center field. He rounded second. The other team began to trade abuse. They’re younger, but not smarter, he decided and took third panting, propelled by the sight of their black and white shirts filling the bases. He admired the large cursive letters that spelled ARAGON, the bar that sponsored them; though someone had asked if it meant the poet. He liked poetry. He liked to think they could still win by finessing it. At their age that would be poetic. Using all the finesse at his disposal to lick the downward slope, he stretched for home. But the call was ‘out’. On the other hand, if they didn’t win, well, he could take it. They’d lost so many times before, he’d gotten used to it.

Etched into a polished aluminium shield measuring twenty-nine by twenty-four inches and projected forward from the wall, this sad but by no means unbeautiful story joins with four others similarly displayed in *Gloria Patri*, Mary Kelly’s 1992 installation. The five flat shields form a series of specular metopes in a lower frieze, often mounted at eye level, above which hang a further set of six thin and flat aluminium trophies, each topped by anachronistic figurines captured in athletic pursuit and burdened with a letter which will spell out G-L-O-R-I-A. Emblazoned at the foot of these trophies are fragments of speech cut from news footage of soldiers in the first Gulf War. The third, and final series of objects, set high over the shields, consists of twenty discs, also aluminium bearing hybridised military insignia.

But to get back to the baseball player, *Gloria Patri* has been positioned, both by Kelly and its critical reception, as addressed to how this particular conflict, that is, the convergence of group violence with a historically specific measure of technological sophistication, made visible the ways in which masculinity could, and indeed does, become pathological. This, Kelly
has stated, was her primary concern for the project.\(^1\) The fictitious narratives written across the shields, four of which feature male protagonists, are introduced to undo the expressions of mastery and display on which this culturally hegemonic image of virile masculinity, rendered so fragile in the context of war, rests. Her technique in these stories, developed most distinctively in the previous major work, *Interim*, is to drive these tales and their characters to the point of parodic excess. Thus, in *Gloria Patri*, we read of an adolescent boy who will ‘throw Arnie on the boob tube and pull some bong’, or a ‘tuftless dibbler’ daydreaming of jokes ‘about big cocks and virgins’. The shields – so assertively fixed three inches from the wall – participate in this somewhat heavy-handed joke. They comprise a façade that ‘backs up’ the absurdity of the characters they chronicle. (And here we might note too that heraldry itself derived from the doing and undoing of cloths that bound primitive shields). Legibility is delivered, and delivered again, excessively. There is a too-muchness that works both with and against the way the rest of the work may otherwise appear to be concerned so assiduously with not just the visible and the vulnerable but the vulnerability of visibility. Which is all to say that a central premise of the work’s material and conceptual thrust seems to be that it is hard to see. Here once more the physical components of the work are pressed into service, lining up their severe facades to reflect back the search-beams which Kelly deploys as outriders for the sensorial assault mounted by the installation. Taken schematically, each category of object lends itself to the task of concealment: the shields screen and deflect the gaze, the trophies abstract themselves whilst the discs (figure 4.4) dissemble and do violence to the legibility of motifs whose function is to assist and augment the task of recognition, to assure seeing into knowing.

The synthesis between the formal arrangement of these objects and the theoretical architecture Kelly borrows for her conceptual support lies behind Homi Bhabha’s observation that *Gloria Patri*’s components mimic ‘the

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\(^1\) ‘I was interested, first of all’, writes Kelly, ‘to present masculinity as something that becomes pathological predominantly in the historical and cultural context of war’. Mary Kelly and Margaret Iversen, ‘Mary Kelly in conversation with Margaret Iversen’, p. 190.
figurative language of Lacan’s description of the topos of the subject’s splitting’. This ‘fracture’ or ‘bi-partition’, is borne out most literally by the shadow gap between the wall and its objects, a fissure that is read as symptomatic of the doubling by which the subject ‘accommodates’ herself in the world. The gap, between the object of desire and the subject of representation, is, for Bhabha, the terrain on which camouflage and mimicry operate, a space of transformation where the category of ‘absence’ is translated as ‘disappearance’ and ‘presence’ as ‘emergence’. It is because these two processes are, from a Lacanian perspective, one and the same – the subject may simultaneously appear in one register (desire) even as it disappears in another (representation) – that the work of camouflage reveals itself. What interests me most about this line of thinking, and the way in which Kelly avails herself of the psychical operations of camouflage in this work, is that it leads Bhabha to find in *Gloria Patri* what he calls ‘the subject beside itself’, a figure that is produced by a ‘lateral’ movement ‘between the mask and the gaze’. This doubled subject is dislocated from the gaze that scans and surveys the reflective surfaces of *Gloria Patri*, running beside ‘or perhaps, behind’ the spectator, effecting a gap that doubles again the caesura between wall and object. For Bhabha, this ‘other who stands unknown beside oneself’, a ‘neighbour in the moral sense of the term’, emerges into the work as a body composed from the repressed ‘underside of the shiny metal surfaces’ and the ‘vulnerable spectatorial body’ whose interplay ‘in that sudden moment when the installation moves’ reveals ‘the ethical and aesthetic power of *Gloria Patri*’. With this interpretation to hand, we might notice that running beside or behind the forty-year-old baseball player as he skirts the bases is his little boy self. Such an imaginary scene throws analogous figures in the four other shield texts into more vivid relief: the masculine ideal self of the woman’s story, the progeny of the new father, the adolescent’s hidden queer self and the old man’s watery reflection. Might we see in this shadow cast a literary

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3 Ibid., p. 96.
4 Ibid., pp. 95-99.
representation of the ‘thrown-off skin’ with which Lacan evokes the concept of display that so fascinates Kelly in this work? Indeed, these second skins too – masks, doubles, envelopes, ‘cover the frame of the shield’.  

Not quite, I suppose. Or at least, not precisely. In *Gloria Patri*, it is the face rather than the frame of the shield that they cover, and then only partially and unevenly. The form of the structure is left resolutely unmasked. But the stories and their subjects do participate in the question of covering, or rather the question of what these shields – if we are to take them as images as much as objects or texts – give or deny access to. There is a moment in her writings, this time in relation to masquerade – the feminine complement to masculine display, that Kelly, warning against ‘being lured into looking for a psychic truth behind the veil’, insists that a critical perspective on her work requires that ‘the viewer should be neither too close nor too far away’. The inference that there is a vantage point for her installations which is just right, that will unlock the full breadth of their meaning, is fully dramatised by how the viewer is positioned in *Gloria Patri*. The use of search lights exposits with no little degree of militarised hostility how one may be ‘fixed by the gaze’, a ensnaring that recalls another of Lacan’s assertions, and one which has remained crucial for Kelly, that ‘in this matter of the visible, everything is a trap’. The viewer, anxious perhaps to avoid being caught in the snare of the lights or the unflinching reflections of the shields (the discs and trophies, whilst similarly burnished, are always positioned by Kelly further toward the upper limit of the gallery space (figure 4.1)) thus finds themselves pitted into a game, she refers to it as a ‘negotiation’, in which the physical dimensions of the room are activated as a conceptual space wherein one’s very presence is at stake.

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6 Mary Kelly, ‘Desiring Images/Imaging Desire’, in *Imaging Desire*, pp. 122-131 (p. 128). For Kelly this an enduring concern for how ensembles of words and things activate their own terms of engagement: ‘For me, it’s also absolutely crucial that this kind of pleasure in the text, in the objects themselves, should engage the viewer, because there’s no point at which anything can become a deconstructed critical engagement if the viewer is not first – immediately and affectively – drawn into the work’. Mary Kelly, ‘No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith’, in the same, pp. 60-78 (p. 67).
Yet this negotiation cannot run its course without a measure of self-
confrontation. Or rather, it is a game in which the viewer has no hope of
winning if the aim is to remain unfixed by the gaze. In *Gloria Patri* there is
no getting away from the sight of oneself in front of the shields. This
moment of self-encounter constitutes a specific moment in the engagement
of the work when the enquiring body pauses, faces the wall, and reads.
Whilst the slogans on the feet of the trophies (figure 4.5) can be taken in at a
glance, the length of the shield narratives, each almost four hundred words
long, demands the body halt in front of them. It is a positioning that entails
the words themselves are printed back onto the body of the viewer, setting
up an inversion that may even camouflage their content against the presence
of the body which, in turn, is entered into the work’s interplay of appearance
and disappearance. Such a configuration of viewer and object allows us to
think about the way in which the doubled characters in these narratives are
not always beside their protagonist but sometimes, temporally at least,
before or behind, from earlier or later in life.

In the way I am attempting to describe it, this configuration of full frontal
disclosure with the basic material structure of the installation might
therefore seem to cut loose from Bhabha’s location of an ‘ethical relation’
emerging from the play of mirrors and movement in *Gloria Patri*, one in
which ‘Peripheral vision displays the proximity to the “other; who stands
unknown beside oneself,”’ as the (un) acknowledged double.*8 For one
thing, this encounter does not involve the body and its image relating side
by side but rather in front of each other. In this specific scene, that
movement which is crucial for Bhabha has been arrested into a more or less

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8 Bhabha, ‘Mary, Mary Quite Contrary’, p. 97. Rather, the configuration I suggest appears
closer to what Bhabha had earlier discussed under cover of the ‘anxiety of the antecedent’.
In which, ‘looking backwards’ comes close to the experience Samuel Weber described of
being caught ‘between two frames; a doubled frame or one that is split’. Bhabha folds this
figuration directly into a dialogue with nationalist tendencies: ‘what enters into this double
frame of the nation’s anxiety is not the naturalized, harmonized unchosen of the amor
patriae – which is also the love of the chosen people – but its double: those who are the
‘unchosen’; the, marginalized or peripheralized no-people of the nation’s democracy’.
Bhabha and Weber quoted in Bhabha, ‘Anxious Nations, Nervous States’, in *Supposing the
static confrontation – the eye might follow the flow of words across the object but the body, even if only for a moment or two, is stationed and has become itself an object in the face of the shield. The subject beside itself now more resembles the Freudian double, and thus composed is perhaps a little less neighbourly; met head-on it is more of a doppelganger, harbinger of the uncanny and agent of displacement. We might consider, then, that Kelly has spoken of how the polished faces of the shields were so severe they made her sick.9

As I have suggested in the previous chapters, Mitchell’s sibling too is amenable to this schema, standing as a fleshy mirror who confronts, traumatises and seduces the subject into the social. Sibling sex and violence thus provide a rich theoretical ground on which to seed many of Gloria Patri’s thematic concerns, in particular the ways in which the double can be thought through the work in the specific context of war. Lacan, in a passage quoted by Margaret Iversen in regard to the installation, notes how ‘one’s own chaotic infantile distress, then, lines any coherent self-image and may be unleashed in fraternal rivalry, aggression and images of the fragmented body’.10 For Iverson it is a clear demonstration of ‘how jubilant (mis)recognition in the mirror can flip over into hostile rivalry. This is partly because identification involves taking the other’s place, that is, killing him’.11 The correspondence with Mitchell’s model is vivid and points at the

9 Bhabha, ‘Mary, Mary Quite Contrary’, p. 91.
10 Quoted in Iversen, ‘Visualizing the Unconscious: Mary Kelly’s Installations’, in Mary Kelly, pp. 34-84 (p. 83). Indeed, this is this movement of Lacan’s theory, which includes his conception of an ‘intrusion complex’, where siblings appear most prominently. Consider a passage from his early Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual (1938): ‘while undergoing this emotional or motor suggestion [from ‘the perception of activity’ or the ‘image of one’s fellow’], the subject does not distinguish himself from the image itself. On the contrary, in the discordance characteristic of this phase the image only adds the temporary intrusion of an alien tendency. Let us call this a narcissistic intrusion: the unity it introduces into the tendencies will nevertheless contribute to the formation of the ego. However, before the ego affirms its own identity it confuses itself with this image which forms it, but also subjects it to primordial alienation. It can be said that from this origin the ego retains the ambiguous structure of the spectacle clearly seen in the situations of despotism, seduction and parade […] and gives their form to the sado-masochistic and scopophilic drives, which are essentially destructive of the other.’ Trans. by Carnac Gallagher, (Dublin: Anthony Rowe, 2002), p. 35.
11 Iversen, ‘Visualizing the Unconscious’, p. 83.
ways in which sibling violence can help account for masculine pathologies that become visible in the situation of war.

Though perhaps this double can be thought of as hard to see in a somewhat different sense. In a way that embarks from the psychic trope of an uncanny deathly presence toward the historical and cultural perspective from which this moment affords a re-reading of *Gloria Patri* as a work of rare, if troubling, prescience. As, if there is much in the work that might be hard to look at on one level, there is much else in its presentation that issues a different challenge to the visual, much that, even as it is secured within the formidable outlines of the shield, would raise a challenge against the security of what these objects mean. In particular this comes from a question of methodology. The textual elements of *Gloria Patri* which, perhaps contrarily, I would argue provide the armature for the ensemble of objects, are the product of what she has called a ‘scriptovisual’ method. (The idea for the work itself had been in incubation for some time but it was the spectacle of the televised Gulf War, and in particular the peculiar qualities of the speech fragments she kept hearing on television that prompted the installation to be brought forth.) The scriptovisual describes a programme of listening and writing that carries Kelly’s extensive transcriptive research into the fabric of her finished work whilst retaining, as it can hardly do otherwise, the capacity to invoke an imaginary loss. Absence is thus present as the speaker of the words, those who are evoked but never seen, spectral presences that are as much a creation of the viewer as they are of Kelly herself. This inadmittance of the body is a persistent and conspicuous trope in her work that extends beyond motif and deep into praxis. Taking her cue from the way Freud turned from the image of the hysteric’s body in the Salpêtrière to what he heard in the consulting room, there is a crucial pivot from looking to listening that endures in *Gloria Patri*. In the consulting room the presentations of the body, the symptoms, if all goes well, are betrayed by the analysis of speech which maps what is said and not said onto a general theory of sexuality and a more precise reconstruction of personal history. Listening thus undoes looking, just as the speech fragments are frozen onto *Gloria Patri*’s shiny facades in order to undo or
undermine the façade of masculine display. And yet, as Kelly’s neologism makes clear, there is much that shuttles between these two primal acts of being with an object: in unmasking display, Kelly, reveals its fraudulency, she shows it up, she allows us to see through its pretenses all the way to the psychic mechanisms on which its defenses hinge. Further, whilst the text pieces derive from Kelly’s own listening, we the viewer can only listen by reading and to read we must look, and to do all of this effectively we are invited to take in these voices, to form images out of them, that is, to entertain the primacy of fantasy in our encounters with the other.

In this sense it is speech that Kelly gives us as the weapon which might pierce the shield. For the shield itself, as again Kelly makes abundantly clear, is one of those objects that aim at making us blind to what we might otherwise see. (To this extent, the shield as much as the texts is raised against the punctive thrust of the visual and its power-to-truth). In his paper on *The Psychogenic Disturbances of Vision*, Freud is careful to emphasise that ‘hysterically blind people are only blind insofar as consciousness is concerned; in their unconscious they see’. 12 The distinction Freud draws here is not just between the conscious and the unconscious but between two psychic processes engaged in a conflict which produces the symptom of hysterical blindness. Significantly this conflict only comes about through a re-working of the theory of the instincts in which a connection is made, for the first time, between the ego and self-preservative instincts which are thus dislocated from, and placed in opposition to, the drive for sexual pleasure. Whilst, as we will see, this reorganisation was to prove highly significant for the development of Freud’s thought during the next ten or so war torn years, it is notable that this struggle for domination should have the seat of vision, the eye, as its object — an organ that elsewhere in Freud’s work always seems to have a particular intimacy with death. In any event, the power struggle in these cases results in the defensive agency of repression asserting its dominance over an excessive scopophilia and shutting down

vision. Eager, as ever, to ground his theory in myth as well as science, Freud illustrates his argument with the story of Peeping Tom and his talion punishment for ogling Lady Godiva on her naked ride through the streets of Coventry. Once again, it can hardly go unnoticed that the tale is not only one in which visual pleasure is turned round into violence but also one which figures, or pictures, the idea that there are certain images which, Gorgon-like, have the power to cancel vision.

Discussing Freud’s paper in his book *Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism*, Andre Green has written of how the hysterically blind have no choice but to turn towards the inner world, to reflect back upon the self.13 Here it is the erotisation of thought rather than sight that illuminates pleasure, hence, perhaps, Freud’s enigmatic statement that the hysterically blind continue to see in their unconscious. Later on in his book Green provides us with a rough analogue for the idea of images that cancel vision through his reference to the poet, playwright and psychoanalyst Jean Gillibert’s term ‘listenerism’. With more than a few echoes of the sciptovisual, we learn that listenerism involves ‘hearing what is unheard of and extraordinary’, a movement ‘towards the invisible’ and even beyond it. It asks us ‘to position oneself outside of the field of vision, avoiding looking and replacing it with listening’ so that we might access ‘the inaudible […] the dull groans of the body, even as far as the voice of silence’.14 To hear the voice of silence suggests a discipline of deep listening which could entertain the notion that silence is a form of speech even if it is a form of speech that cancels itself. This notion of speech both positive and negative is appreciably crucial for Green’s investigation of narcissism in as much as:

[…] speech mediates between body and language, in a psychical hand-to-hand, speech is psyche. It is a mirror, or rather an interplay of prismatic mirrors, breaking up the light of bodies or recomposing the spectrum of luminous rays. But it is also the link between one

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14 Ibid., p. 8.
body and another, one language and another, One and Other. In truth it is not only a relation but the representation of relations.¹⁵

But ‘What’, Green then asks, ‘is meant by representation?’ By way of an answer he proposes a composition of four elements: ‘binding, unbinding, the Same and the Other’.¹⁶ As a model that is drawn out from Green’s reflection on narcissistic relations, reflections premised on how narcissism is a uniquely mirrored and mirroring conceptual category, representation in this sense would suggest an alternative but no less compelling framework for bringing together *Gloria Patri*’s material and conceptual schemes. For these four terms seem deeply pertinent for thinking about how the installation maps an investment in the negotiation of difference onto objects, both conceptual and material, distinguished by internal division, repetition and inversion. Objects which, in other words, offer insight into their own intrinsic self-referentiality. Binding and unbinding stand for Green as the primal categories of the drive, an elemental dualism of life and death in whose asymmetrical admixtures are found the full gamut of psychic experience. Moreover, Green’s clinical and theoretical object here is latent, we might even venture a ‘present-absence’, in the literature on *Gloria Patri* in which narcissism is perhaps deemed too legible, too given, to be worthy of extensive unpacking.¹⁷ But surely Narcissus, a brooding Laconian hunter – Laconia is a region in the South East Peloponnese from which we draw the laconic mode of speech – both intolerant of feminine company and at the same time something of a walking metaphor for psychic bisexuality, whose face appears and disappears in countless shimmering reflections, signifies a felicitous myth for the task of peering into all those buffed up shields and figurine-topped trophies.

In Ovid’s version of the story this beautiful but indifferent youth spurns the attentions of his admirers and finds interest only in the virile thrills of the hunt. The nymph, Echo, is his most persistent suitor but her pining takes the

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¹⁵ Ibid., p. 37.
¹⁶ Ibid., p. 44.
¹⁷ Indeed, for Green ‘narcissism is the cornerstone of the Lacanian system’. Ibid., p. 10.
form of a withdrawal from the world. Indifferent and anorexic, she ends up leaving no more than a voice; her body, her visibility, is erased. But it is Echo’s fate, a shift from looking to listening, that sets in train a suite of doubling and criss-crossing identifications that enrich the myth’s dramatic climax: first, Echo’s anorexia is reflected back on to Narcissus’ own post-hunt thirst, a desire that compels him to drink from the river; but the river in this instance also happens to be his father, the minor deity, Cephissus, whilst his mother Liriope, is, like Echo, a nymph. What Narcissus sees in the father is an image he doesn’t recognise but which he does fall in love with. Like Echo, Narcissus practices a form of love in which the rest of the world falls away, he too grows anorexic – identifying, as Green observes, with his mother’s double. Taken by his reflection, Narcissus disappears into himself and renunciates life.

In *Gloria Patri* Kelly gives us not a beautiful youth but a ‘tuftless dibbler’ – Narcissus grown old, perhaps more heedful then, on some level, of Tiresias’ prophecy that the child would live a long life on the condition that he did not come to know himself. Or we might think, following the blind priest’s oracle, of the ‘quirky thought soon banished’ by the new father in another of the shield’s tales. Captivated witness to the emergence of his son – head like a ‘crumpled tulip’ – from his wife’s body, he sees only ‘an old man facing her right thigh’ the sight of whom prompts the unbidden words ‘he will kill me’ to leap from the unconscious. Other versions of the Narcissus myth push the Oedipal envelope further still. In the Beotian telling the role of unrequited admirer is given to a young boy who ends up committing suicide with Narcissus’ sword, after which the protagonist re-enacts this death in turn, leaving for his posthumous cult a flower the colour of blood, or castration. The physical wound to complement or double the psychic pain in this account reminds us that the narcissist suffers not only from an affliction of youth but is necessarily a wounded subject. The pathology is thus taken

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18 In this uncanny scene, the eyes, as ever, belong to the father.
up precisely as a shield whose mirroring surfaces, as we see in the myth of Perseus and Medusa, may make for a very deadly defence mechanism.\textsuperscript{19}

It is with the subject of narcissism that Lacan begins the 1951 paper on the mirror stage that Kelly and others have often invoked when writing or speaking about \textit{Gloria Patri}.\textsuperscript{20} This is the paper in which Lacan gives us his sketch of the, explicitly male, homo-psychologicus who, standing by his broken-down car, ‘exteriorises the protective shell of his ego, as well as the failure of his virility’.\textsuperscript{21} The narcissistic shield emerges in this text from ‘the gap separating man from nature’, a splitting of the subject that is irreducibly twofold in every respect; not only does the shield bear a ‘nacreous covering on which is painted the world from which he is forever cut off, but this same structure is also the site where his own milieu is grafted on to him’.\textsuperscript{22} This milieu, clarified by Lacan as the ‘society of his fellow men’, reminds us not only of Kelly’s assertion that what is generalised by the homo-psychologicus is more accurately taken as a figure of specifically masculine pathology but also that narcissism’s solipsistic ascriptions, its anti-social nature, should not deflect from its dependency on, indeed its extreme relations to, the group and the social.

There is something that seems to proceed from narcissism’s characteristic and wilfully recursive mono-directionality, the confluence of its object-taking and subject-making, that has marked it as a category inimical to

\textsuperscript{19} See Freud’s 1922 essay ‘Medusa’s Head’ which opens with the blunt equation: ‘To decapitate = to castrate’. Although only published after his death, note the date of the text’s drafting which places it squarely in the trajectory Green plots from the outline of narcissism to the discovery of the death drive. In \textit{SE}, vol. xviii, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), pp. 273-274 (p. 273). Of course, in the Medusa myth we are witness to a double movement that pertains as much to the reflectivity of narcissism as it does to the circularity of the death drive, wherein the traumatic response of Medusa to her rape by Poseidon and further punishment by Athena (the familial metaphors are fairly straightforward) – the ‘turning to stone’ – is co-opted as a weapon in the armory of psychic defences. Thus, when Perseus, another aggressor, succeeds in returning the gaze to whence it came, his triumph over her mirrors the rape, returning Medusa to stone.

\textsuperscript{20} ‘Some Reflections on the Ego’ is also cited by Foster in his discussion of Bellmer after Theweleit, a passage I cite in my Introduction. Foster, ‘Armor Fou’, p. 69 n.8.


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 16. One is tempted to suppose that Lacan may here have in mind Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles onto which Hephaestus had ornately inscribed the earthly riches and pleasures over which war could be gladly waged.
thinking about groups as psychically unstable entities. When it does surface, narcissism tends to be recognised in the group via the narcissism of small differences, a process that relies on a double relation of exclusion and illusion, a restless delineation that makes bodies into a body. Thus Krauss, in the first entry under the chapter ‘Horizontality’ in the Formless catalogue, offers a common association from the Lacanian account of the mirror-stage; namely that narcissism secures the good gestalt, it binds self and other into a fixed, if false, whole. As such it is pitted against the porous lateral work of the formless, which Krauss had earlier characterised as ‘this will toward self-defacement, this anti-narcissism’.23 The image she presents to illustrate and advance the opposition between narcissism and the formless is the painting of a kneeling Narcissus by Caravaggio in the Palazzo Barberini (figure 4.3), a work that had fascinated Lacan. Krauss notes that the image of self-encounter, even when kneeling as in the Caravaggio painting, is a vertical, upright image. Its orientation is confirmed by the coherence it derives from being arranged along and around the boy’s weight bearing right arm; the two crouching figures, one atop the other, form an elongated oval projecting upwards in its encounter with the viewer.24 The water, in that deathly painting, is resolutely stilled. Any ripples, any signs of life, would disintegrate the image, fracturing the subject into a shimmering corps morcelé, a body in bits and pieces.

But it seems clear to me that Caravaggio’s painting is all the more deathly because the ripples do not dissemble the pristine reflection. Instead death seems to emanate from the water’s very stillness, lodged pervasively in a reflection that is both fraudulent and foreboding in what it offers the youth. The danger lies not in becoming a corps morcelé but in the false assurance of sameness. Something of a vanitas then, this painting would seem an

24 Krauss, ‘Gestalt’, p. 90. Leaving aside, for a moment, the relations between the death drive and the formless, the more minor correspondence I want to draw from bringing together Green’s expanded conception of narcissism with Krauss’ reading of Bataille is on the point of what these accounts make visible or sensible at the level of representation. Both discourses are drawn towards forces, operations on the one hand and the drive on the other, which structure a negative aspect. Thus, the fronto-parallel optical register of the gestalt and positive narcissism each has to do with a repression which establishes a naturalised common sense at the cost of conceptual multi-dimensionality.
appropriate frontispiece for Green’s theory of death or negative narcissism, defined at its most elemental level as ‘the relations between narcissism and the death drive’. Not so much in the way that it (pre)figures the obliteration of the subject, the collapse of the self into itself, but rather in its pinning to the very image of narcissism – of illusory unity and sameness, the work of the death drive; one cannot look death in the face, according to Freud, but perhaps one may catch a glimpse of it in the mirror.

Appearances, in other words, are especially deceiving at the sharp end of narcissism. This is where, at ‘the narcissistic moment par excellence’, Green’s quadripartite model of representation reminds us, in its clustering of opposites, its pairing of pairs, of the primary process of reversal into its opposite that is so crucial for psychoanalytic enquiry. It warns that, if we are alert to the process of binding then, within its representation, we must just as surely be witness to the process of unbinding. Of that ‘moment par excellence’ Green writes:

[It] is the fusion of the object and its image in the fascinating and mortifying liquid element, going back to a period before birth.

Before birth, after birth: here primal narcissism is literally scotomized in favour of the attraction of outward appearance, of the beauty of form in search of its double, which will never be complementary but a duplicate.

This ‘duplicate’ is described by Green as ‘an invisible object’, one that resists all means of representation. Indeed, the whole theory of negative narcissism is one that proceeds from, and operates on, the level of opacity rather than transparency, a plane of misleading appearances, illusionistic diversion, sleights of hand and their interlocking with theoretical deduction. A few words on the history of the conceptual category should help elucidate this claim:

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26 Ibid., p. 6.
Before narcissism there were the drives of self-preservation, after, there were the death drives. In the interregnum between the first and last theory of the drives, narcissism was the result of the libidinisation of the ego drives, hitherto directed to self-preservation.27

In other words, it was only through the postulation of the death drive that the category of narcissism was, tout court, confined to the remit of Eros, a shift which emptied out its prior complexity. But whilst the death drive obscured the complexity of narcissism on one level it also provides Green with a retrospective support for the recuperation of its negative aspect, one which proceeds by the same rule that postulates a Thanatos to balance Eros:

It would seem logical to assume that any investment contains within it the disinvestment which is its shadow projected backwards, conjuring up the mythical state prior to desire; and forwards, anticipating the neutralizing appeasement following the satisfaction of a desire that is felt to have been completely satisfied. A plausible explanation may be found in negative narcissism, the ramifications of which, in my opinion, include all the ways in which narcissistic satisfaction is enhanced by the non-satisfaction of desire for the object. This is considered more desirable than satisfaction which involves dependence on the object, on its unpredictable changeableness and on its responses which always fall short of the expectations it is supposed to fulfill.28

It is fascinating to note in this passage how the deduction that assumes any investment contains a disinvestment proceeds to a situation in which ‘narcissistic satisfaction is enhanced by the non-satisfaction of desire for the object’. And yet this latter, at first much more confounding situation, shares with the former proposition a certain resemblance insofar as it is predicated

27 Ibid., p. x.
28 Ibid., p. 17.
on a hypothesis of the essential perversity of things; one which asserts the irreducibility of the primary process to render anything into its opposite.

To clarify, as opposed to cases of positive narcissism, in which ‘others are seen as being of low value: ignorant, vulgar, common, cheap’ those afflicted by negative narcissism view themselves as ‘worthy of universal contempt’ with ‘no right to any respect or gratification’. Green is therefore understandably anxious to disentangle this pathology from what Freud termed moral masochism, which, rather more than positive narcissism, is how Green suggests it may be most often misrecognised. For, in addition to separating self-sufficient withdrawal on the one hand from self-loathing withdrawal on the other, negative narcissism distinguishes itself from moral masochism not just by taking aim at object cathexes and ‘the self itself’ but, crucially, by aiming most enduringly at self-disappearance. Green attributes this effect to what he terms the ‘disobjectalizing function’ which works to undo the ‘objectalizing function’, that is, the process by which objects are invested with psychic significance. It is the cutting of such ties with external objects that eases negative narcissism’s pull toward a disappearance that unties the self from the external world altogether. What thus emerges from the theory and the history of narcissism as a psychoanalytic concept is a set of phenomena which seem to be underwritten by a particular relation with the visible; to begin with, a false image – that is narcissism itself and its seductive promise of unity – extended as much to psychoanalytic theory as to the psychoanalytic subject; then an eclipse at the level of theory, or at least a partial elision, in the form of the ‘discovery’ of the death-drive, leading to the abandonment or invisibility of its negative aspect; followed by the misrecognition of a pathology by its positive form or by moral masochism; and finally, in the form of a symptom, a disappearance.

Such an entanglement with visibility is inevitable for narcissism, all the more so as its quiddity is addressed by the notion of negative or positive

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impressions. But the negative here denotes far more than the index of the obverse form and nothing less the calm but clammy embrace of death. An embrace which Green places deep within a pathology that is not only more concerned with emergence and disappearance than presence and absence but works to dissolve difference, to erase the question of whether this death is another’s or one’s own. Thus narcissism in its negative aspect would appear crucial to how the death drive troubles moments of self-encounter and incapacitates modes of representational capture when it comes to imaging the body, how it troubles representation itself. For the question of death as it collides with representational strategy cannot be evacuated from the place and production of absence within *Gloria Patri*. The bodies, disappearing in her practice almost from the beginning continue disappearing here, disappearing into high tech assemblages of killing and steel, disappearing over there, in the television, in the Gulf; in carriers of death submitting to its pull.

One of the things which Kelly’s project and Green’s work on narcissism share is that they are both projects which aim to make visible that which is in front of us. This is acutely the case in regard to a death narcissism which is so intimate with misrecognition, with camouflage, and depends, as a psychoanalytic proposition, on the acceptance of Freud’s most contentious ‘discovery’. As Green writes, the ‘mimesis of desire’ may invert itself as ‘the mimesis of non-desire, desire for non-desire:

The quest for satisfaction continues beyond any form of satisfaction – as if it had already been obtained – as if it had got what it wanted by abandoning the search for satisfaction. It is here that death takes on the aspect of absolute Being. Life becomes equivalent to death because it is a release from all desire.  

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30 How could it be otherwise? Green’s historiography of the psychoanalytic concept is so many instances of the pathology at work, so many turns at which the negative aspect of narcissism blocks the possibility of its recognition.

31 The ‘negative’ has exceeded Green’s work on narcissism and needs to be understood at the core of his major interventions into psychoanalytic theory. See Green, *The Work of the Negative*, trans. by Andrew Weller (London: Free Association Books, 1999).

How does one proceed from this disorientation in thinking again about what *Gloria Patri* makes visible about the conjunction of masculinity, technology and violence? It occurs to me that a useful starting point may, once more, be found in the shields. Firstly, these are objects that find familiar associative traction across the grain of those three terms, often offering themselves, as Kelly shows, as well-worn prostheses. Conspicuous to this are the two faces of the shield, the recto-verso structure that is carried into its psychic disclosures. What I mean by this is the way the shield is made to speak: on the one hand it says ‘I will not die’, ‘I am in a fight but I do not wish to die’, within which, quite straightforwardly, the implication is contained that ‘I know I am threatened, there is a possibility I might die’. This second admission provides the switch between the two faces, leading to a third confession of the shield ‘I am dying’; invulnerability has indexed vulnerability.33 But as an object burdened with the weight of this communication the shield has historically required an object-ness commensurate with the stakes of which it speaks. Thus, the tangible weight of the object stands in relation to the assurances it provides – and this, I would venture, is something else that Kelly takes aim at in the thinness of her shields, their dialogue with light and suspension.

In terms of psychical weight, then, these objects carry a pressure which is applied to the wound they both testify to and deny, a wound which may or may not be terminal. The narcissistic wound, says Green, is compensatory for the signal achievement of Eros in unifying a fragmented ego, ‘inflicted by the impossibility of being the Other’.34 To my mind this affliction is legible in all four of the stories Kelly writes in *Gloria Patri*, most explicitly in the shield on which a woman violently rejects her own femininity (‘knees

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33 This crucial aspect of masculine display is most often articulated in relation to *Gloria Patri* through the often-referenced debt to Norman Bryson’s essay on Géricault’s *Charging Chasseur*. The ‘bravura image’ emerging but somehow ‘botched’, as Bryson put it, suggests itself to Kelly as a parallel figure for the war hysteria of the US at a moment of comparative global demilitarisation whereby the ornate projection of invulnerability simultaneously expresses a pronounced anxiety. Bryson, ‘Géricault and Masculinity’, in *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, ed. Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), pp. 228-259 (p. 239).

34 Green, *Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism*, p. xxiii.
pried apart in accordance with an ancient rule, she forced them together slowly, deliberately refusing her allotted place and held her new position hard and fast’ (figure 4.2)), but also in the way each narrative spins off or hones in on encounters that betray some melancholic substrate and recount each character’s loss of some part of their self. The backdrop of war against which these shields are set might confirm to us the extremity, the uncontainable endpoint at which this wound might yield the (negatively) narcissistic satisfaction of ‘a release from all desire’.

It is there, at that point, Green would have it, ‘that death takes on the aspect of absolute Being’. Is it pushing too hard to imagine these as words which can speak to the ecstatic thrills of high octane bombing missions that pulse through the exclamations Kelly lines up above the shields: ‘not enough gees and gollies to describe it’, ‘cut it off and kill it”? More plausible, perhaps, if the death of one and other, killing and being killed, are exchangeable and over-proximate in the unconscious. The simultaneous nearness and farness war technologies afford seems psychologically resonant in this context, bringing out the narcissistic economy of vicarity. At least one echo might sound from the lateral experience of sibling encounter where ‘death as a possible presence’ is figured in the body of the sibling and so experienced, in Green’s words, as something ‘already obtained’.

Encounter, along with exposure, is, I think, an important term for the way Kelly works *Gloria Patri* around two formal qualities that govern its aesthetic structure and from which much of its conceptual and sensorial impact issues. The first of these is what she describes as the ‘horrific shininess’ of the component objects and the second is the way they are presented in a scheme of ‘fanatical repetition’. Whilst the theme of unperishable repletion summons classically narcissistic tropes, it is the way reflectivity and repetition are framed, as either horrific or fanatical, that evokes most strongly the work’s debt to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As

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35 Ibid., p. 221.
36 Mary Kelly and Douglas Crimp, ‘Mary Kelly in conversation with Douglas Crimp’, in *Mary Kelly*, pp. 7-30 (p. 29).
if in a hall of mirrors, the self-image thrown back again and again by the coupling of these two qualities is traumatic. Just this pattern first alerted Freud to reconsider holding pleasure to be the supra-organisational psychic agency, it initiated the work which gave birth to the concept of the death drive. This re-doing, this working over again and again, thus undid, or threatened to unravel much of the foundations of his metapsychology leading, ironically, to the formulation of a drive distinguished by its compulsion to undo.

Two years before Green’s Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism came to print in 1983, his friend and colleague J.B. Pontalis published the short essay On Death-Work in English.\textsuperscript{37} Both texts, one isn’t surprised to find, invest themselves deeply in the legacy of Beyond the Pleasure Principle. While Green proceeds from his claim the ‘true meaning’ of Freud’s title is that ‘the metaphor of returning to inanimate matter is more powerful than it seems’, Pontalis suggests ‘it is as though the metaphors of Beyond the Pleasure Principle have become, fifty years later, those of our culture’.\textsuperscript{38} Thus the closing paragraphs of On Death-Work are devoted to reflecting, from the distance of half a century, on the metaphorical reach of Freud’s still controversial paper. In the world as Pontalis finds it, the social forms taken by the death drive appear everywhere, betraying the insidious undermining of life forces – from the failed promises of industrialisation and revolutionary socialism to ‘the disorderly proliferation of suburban complexes’.\textsuperscript{39}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{37} Green’s Narcissisme de Vie Narcissisme de Mort, composed of essays written between 1966 and 1982, was published by Collection Critique in 1983 before being translated into English by Andrew Weller for Free Association Books in 2001. ‘On-Death-work’ appears as Chapter 14 in Frontiers, first published as Entre le rêve et la douleur by Gallimard in 1977 and translated by Catherine and Philip Cullen for Hogarth in 1981. Pontalis’ essay is a double reference in the title of this thesis.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Green, Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism, p. xxi; Pontalis, ‘On Death-Work’, p. 193.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Pontalis, ‘On Death-Work’, p. 192.
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So many examples conjure a dystopian panorama but ‘the effectiveness of death instincts’, Pontalis writes, is to be ‘recognized less in the images we give to them than in their processes, which negate any possible dialectic, since every image can be reversed into its opposite’. The point being that all the various figurations of the death drive – as destrudo, aggression, apathy, zero, infinity, non-existence and so on – distract from ‘what is essential in Freud’s intuition: the death instinct asserts itself in a radical unbinding process, a process of enclosure that has no aim but its own accomplishment and whose repetitive nature is the sign of its instinctivity’.

Binding/unbinding is thereby translated into the coupling enclosure/breaking, a ‘pair of opposites which would appear to have no other end than of generating its own repetition’ and which emerge, pointedly, in the text from a discussion of the object which Pontalis finds paradigmatic of a ‘closed system’: the computer. He writes:

An ever increasing mass of information cutting off the individual from any sensual reality of social communication, robbing him of his creativity; in ‘cultural life’, the proliferation of esoteric languages no longer referring to anything but themselves: there is an exchange but only between oneself - endogamy prevails and the narcissism of small differences triumphs.

It strikes me that lurking in what Pontalis is railing against is a condemnation of the feedback loop, that bedrock of cybernetics, as an analogue for a certain type of communicative system. Such systems are figuratively opposed to a formulation he shares with Green that, after Freud’s death drive, being, at its most irreducible, can only be construed as difference. ‘Difference-as-being’, as Green puts it, describes the condition of what is not, or rather what is against, death-work. Yet, as both analysts are keen to emphasise, the corollary of this formula, that we associate

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40 Ibid. Whilst the word ‘instinct’ is retained here when quoting Pontalis it is important to note that this term is a confusing and unfortunate translation of ‘pulsion’, the French term he uses for the death drive. See Laplanche and Pontalis, pp. 214-217.


42 Ibid., p. 192.
sameness with Thanatos, is misleading. Misleading in good part because of the essentially negative aspect of the drive, for the death drive is rarely, if ever, a ‘pure culture’ and further, as Green has already shown us, it can be hard to see, often assuming the forms by which it will be most likely misrecognised. At the beginning of On Death-Work Pontalis had written of how ‘death is always insidiously present behind the most diverse masks, often silent, sometimes noisy, but always active along the paths of existence’. 43

Tying the end to the beginning of this thesis, I would like to introduce a project that places the memetic image fully within the arena of this death-work. More specifically, it casts the memetic image against the outlines of a shield which, in this sense, serves as a continuity trope with Kelly’s installation. As in Gloria Patri, the shield’s deployment in BREITBART.RED (2018–), an ongoing and mostly online work by the Swiss-Austrian net.art duo Ubermorgen, can be construed as suggestive of a narcissistic regression – a formal support for the projection of defensive mechanisms. 44 Also in common with Gloria Patri, the shield joins the rest of the components of the work as the dominant element in a tripartite structure, or rather a tripartite structure that is again divided into three sections. But where Kelly’s installation is arranged in a series of friezes which are met by the viewer simultaneously, BREITBART.RED locks together in stages. Each stage is also divided into three themes or channels – ASMR, Superdry and vaporwave – so that one can organise a reading of the work either through each of these thematic headers or through the three stages that comprise them. On the first screen-stage of each channel one is confronted with a billowing, swelling and disappearing cascade of text set against a blank pink, purple or yellow neon background. The syntax, inflexion and tonal bearing of these short sentences effect a mimicry of the language of lifestyle branding, offering such vacuous promises as ‘warm feelings of deep wellbeing’ that issue from a ‘holistic libertarian

43 Ibid., p. 184.
44 In view of this evolving status my comments on BREITBART.RED are reserved to its unchanged presentation online from April to August 2019 and its display in Dortmund.
transcendence’. A few short moments later, sooner than it takes to pin down these sentences, this evasive textual field gives way to another blank ground. This time it is the text that is coloured, the ground remains black across which a set of five commandments hurl themselves in and out of position. We entertain the imperative to ‘Focus and enlighten yourself’, to ‘Feel the distant and blurred memory’ or ‘Be excited jumper season is here’ before again surrendering to the third and final stage of the work. Here a shield, in what medievalists would call the ‘heater’ shape (lacking the engrailed top of Kelly’s steel protectors and complete with roundels, a mantle and an inlaid charge), floats against, and pulses with, a slurry of JPEGs and animated GIFs that blitz its escutcheon. The speed with which these catalogues, pulled from a set of Tumblr accounts, are recycled on the shield’s frame is constant save for the occasional buffering swirl. Or at least it appears constant at first. For at this point one may have already grasped the basic mechanism for navigating the website, indeed the second commandment in each channel is ‘Move your mouse’. It is possible to wait out each screen but much quicker to shuttle through via an impatient click. The mouse has another function at the third and final screen-stage, where one starts to notice that the movement of the cursor influences both the speed at which the images pulse behind the central motif and, in concert with the acceleration or deceleration of the images, a sonic pitch which gets deeper at the perimeter and lifts at the center.

In its only physical manifestation to date (figure 4.6), the work was one of twelve which comprised ‘Der Alt-Right Komplex’ at the Hartware MedienKunstVerein in Dortmund in 2019, the first institutional exhibition addressed to the alt-right. Addressed is the operative word here, as the artists themselves have described BREITBART.RED as ‘art for the right’. Indeed, one of the major aims of the processual nature of the work’s structure is to, by explicit means, construct and address a viewer that becomes the subject of the work itself. I shall return to this idea.

momentarily but for now it is worth clarifying that the parodic identification with ‘the right’ is wholly consistent with the artists’ practice to date. Ubermorgen is comprised of the couple Hans Bernhard and Lizvlx who have worked together under the moniker since 1999, prior to which Bernhard had been one of the seven members of all male 1990s net.art group etoy.\(^\text{46}\) Since collaborating, their projects have been exemplars of strategic ‘over-identification, affirmation, mimicry and pastiche’, modes which enter at number four in Teixeira Pinto and Stakemeier’s *A Brief Glossary of Social Sadism*, published in the German-English journal *Texte zur Kunst* a few months after *BREITBART.RED* was displayed in Dortmund.\(^\text{47}\) Whilst neither the exhibition, Ubermorgen, nor *BREITBART.RED* are mentioned in the polemic, one might have understood if the authors had felt fit to include the work in their broadside against ‘artists who are fond of flirting with the language, symbols, and memes of the alt-right’.\(^\text{48}\) In previous projects the duo have masqueraded as a parafictitious platform selling Californian votes directly to super PACs in the 2000 United States election (*Vote Auction* (2000)); developed and deployed a network of hidden websites to serve Google text ads (*Google Will Eat Itself, Autocannibalism* (2005)); and invited viewers to interrogate themselves with the enhanced interrogation techniques used by the United States military in the wake of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (*Superenhanced Generator* (2008)). Whilst each project mounted an ostensible critique of the reactionary, illiberal and repressive exploitation of media technological affordances by corporate and state power, Teixeira

\(^\text{46}\) It is worth underscoring Bernhard’s experience as a founding member of etoy. In particular the artist references this chapter of his past when speaking about making art for the right, being of the opinion that had the group been exposed to the scene of neoreaction currently available online he is sure his collaborators would have been attracted to its apparently transgressive posturing. Etoy was comprised of seven young men in their late teens and early twenties who gained notoriety in net.art circles through their adoption of fascistic cues such as shaved heads, bomber jackets, intense male group bonding exercises which regulated contact with women. There is, of course, a pedigree for this kind of male group that looks backward to the Freikorps discussed in previous chapters and groups such as the Proud Boys who, alongside pursuing activist and harassment campaigns, also regulate members’ sexual habits. For a primer on etoy, see Adam Wishart and Regula Bochsler, *Leaving Reality Behind: The battle for the soul of the internet* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002).


\(^\text{48}\) Ibid., p. 82.
Pinto and Stakemeier’s article is reflective of a turning mood towards practices which offer pleasures the pose of the oppressor supplies.

I mention *A Brief Glossary of Social Sadism* not so much to engage *BREITBART.RED* on the terms of its argument, nor just to register the contested critical ground the work enters, but to take from the text a claim which I think can be turned productively to a reading of *BREITBART.RED* that goes beyond the stakes Teixeira Pinto and Stakemeier set out, namely that ‘contemporary art hasn’t been able to think through the contradictions between what it purports to do and what it inadvertently does’. The pressure on this statement flows directly from the political situation into which this work is set forth, yet it contains a welcome emphasis on work, the work that a work does, in such a way that goes beyond and despite any programme of conscious intention. This is another way of saying it opens up the idea of what a work offers of the unconscious and the related questions of how recognition of unconscious work might help us think through what art can help us see. A provisional suspension of what *BREITBART.RED* is supposed to be doing helpfully makes space where notions of irony and identification were – that is, in the place of strategy, for a pause in which we can take the work at face value. In narrowing our focus to the psychic operations that exceed questions of what *BREITBART.RED* is meant to do, we secure a less obstructed view on the object of analysis.

The curious selection of channels which divide the work thematically is explained by the artists as a means of suggesting that, such is the strategic opacity of the alt-right, any cultural item is vulnerable to a tactically enigmatic appropriation, that any sign may be hi-jacked and re-coded as an alt-right signifier. Leaving this rationale to one side, I want to suggest that there is a way to construe each of these three channels – Superdry, ASMR

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49 Ibid., p. 92.
50 In correspondence with Ubermorgen, July 2019. There is a broad literature on the strategic appropriation of mainstream brands by far-right groups, for a recent example in the German context see Cynthia Miller-Idriss, 2018, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).
and vaporwave, as legible to negative narcissism and death-work. Whilst negative narcissism does not provide an explanation for the selection, it would not cohere these three themes into a logic, I think it does surface something in each category which bears out on the psychic dynamics which can be elaborated from BREITBART.RED.

To take the last of these first (figures 4.13-4.15), vaporwave derives from a highly synthetic genre of anemic electronica associated with the neoreactionary faction of the alt-right. It is as close as the alt-right come to a homogenous aesthetic style, replete with a more or less coherent, if limited, language of motifs, visual syntax and techniques. Neoreaction itself extends the logic of accelerationist thought, beckoning a threshold at which humanity is rendered subordinate to the evolution of artificial intelligence. What this ‘singularity’ demands is an apparently libidinal investment in a future which erases the present in reification of the sheer force of capital. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the many ziggurats, Corinthian columns and antique busts that typically populate vaporwave dreamscapes suggest that this focus on the yet-to-come has strong designs on the past. As others have noted, the genre adopts a position of submissive, sometimes even melancholic thrall to deterministic narratives that harness evolutionary paradigms. In this fantasy, humanity, in every sense, is on the brink of erasure. Accordingly, on BREITBART.RED we switch from fragments

52 See, for instance, Benjamin Noys, Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism (London: Zero Books, 2014) and Alex Williams and Nick Smicek, ‘#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics’, in #Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader, ed. by Robin Mackay and Armen Avenian (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2014), 349-362. Brenton Tarrant cited accelerationism in the manifesto he uploaded to 8chan before his massacre in Christchurch (a document referenced, in turn, by Patrick Crusius, the El Paso shooter) and whose ‘Great Replacement’ title makes explicit the line of connection between these two narratives. See Teixeira Pinto, ‘Capitalism with a Transhuman Face’ and ‘The Psychology of Paranoid Irony’, as well as Gogarty, ‘The Art Right’.
53 For a perceptive and multi-layered analysis of the ‘end of man’ narrative of which accelerationism is but one privileged expression, see Joanna Zylinska’s 2018 photo-film Exit Man. Zylinska notes the numerous disavowals of women, non-binary and non-white subjects amidst the apocalyptic redemption and restoration of the story’s implicit subject.
54 Teixeira Pinto: ‘it is not capital that is no longer a proper vehicle for humanity’s actualisation of its own essence; rather, humanity is no longer a proper vehicle for capital’s actualisation of its own essence’. ‘Capitalism with a Transhuman Face’, p. 321.
indulging ‘the deep sadness of the internet’ to a shield lit up by Pepsi logos, Trump, palm trees, laser grids and skyscrapers pulsing in a palette of pinks, purples, hot blues and acid greens. America must *return* rather than proceed to greatness and it will dance to a soundtrack of ‘pre-African rhythms’, a reminder of ‘way back’. In the face of which, it may be worth reminding ourselves what political motives this absurdist regime is marshalled to, projects in which the work of the drive needs no unpacking: internment camps, vast fantasias of militarism, state sanctioned extrajudicial killing, the acceleration of total environmental catastrophe, all distinguishing a pronounced shift or movement in the practice of global politics toward an unbinding of the social.

Turning to the ASMR channel (figures 4.7-4.9), a 2018 *New York Times* feature relates how the current profusion of autonomous sensory meridian response videos on Youtube are likened by their listening communities to the experience of being soothed as a small child and, further, that the producers of this content are almost exclusively women and most often anonymous. A niche genre of Web culture, ASMR videos feature recordings of sounds produced by the unconventional misuse and percussive exploitation of everyday objects; shaving a bar of soap for instance or blowing gently into an empty crisp packet. Followers testify that these sounds provoke powerful tactile sensations and unlocatable pleasures. The category permeates across all three of *BREITBAT.RED*’s channels, providing the sonic key for the ‘warm feelings of deep wellbeing’ which we are invited to imagine could be triggered by ‘a tingling sensation across the scalp and back of the head’. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, the signpost to modes of infantile sexuality is clear but still, I think, somewhat misleading if we are to think only of a polymorphous erotisation of objects. Rather, the earliest forms of sexuality are active well before the neonate can

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56 In most ASMR recordings pleasure is obtained without recourse to the visual or the verbal for whilst ‘whispering’ videos comprise a significant subcategory of the genre the words themselves are uttered inaudibly.
conceive of such things as objects or externality. At this stage, no thing is distinct from the subject. Freud characterised this passage of dawning life by ‘the total absence of any relationship to the outside world’, a state of total psychic asociality.57

This condition of a consummate at-one-ness with the subject’s environment characterises primary narcissism. It is the level to which Green is drawn in the epilogue of Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism, pages dedicated to Brigitte Pontalis and which acknowledge their debt to her husband’s essay. The rubric now is not a set of opposing pairs, binding and unbinding, same and other, but the collapse of difference as it structures the fantasy of immortality.58 One can well see why such a fantasy should provide the last word on Green’s project. In claiming an inextinguishable life, triumph over death, immortality neatly demonstrates the inversion by which the drive’s negative aspect may be apprehended. The nirvana principle, the idea borrowed by Freud from Barbara Low and which first makes its appearance in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, is invaluable for Green’s analysis here. He locates it’s influence on Freud’s thought seven crucial years earlier in On Narcissism (1914), in which the principle of inertia is introduced.59 The equivalence conveyed by the nirvana principle between before life and after life, returns death to the fantasy of invulnerability that absolute primary narcissism and immortality trade in. Denying both space and time, the immortal ego ‘no longer knows the finiteness of ‘being there’ or the wearing

58 Consider, then, the role of narcissism in the sibling encounter: ‘At the same time as experiencing its own replacement and hence non-existence, the toddler will hope the new baby is ‘more of itself,’ as such it will (narcissistically) love it to excess […] Because [the toddler] thinks [the baby] is the same as itself, it narcissistically loves it. But the new baby (or threat of a baby) is also too much of itself, if it exists it will be the same as itself – an annihilating replacement. So it is because the baby is the same (not, as we mistakenly think, because it is different) that the toddler wants to get rid of it […] The result is that there is a near simultaneity of the desire for physical love/sexuality and for murder’. Mitchell clarifies that underlying the defense mechanisms at work here are the primary processes ““reversal into the opposite and turning round upon the subject’s own self.” In this love turns to hate, hate to love within moments, the annihilated toddler becomes the annihilator and the human object becomes the human subject and the subject becomes the object’. Mitchell, ‘Why Siblings?’, p.5 n.17.
59 Green, Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism, p. 220.
effect of ‘the here-and-now’. Refusing to acknowledge the experiential qualities thrust onto being by Eros, there is a regression to a state before time and space.\textsuperscript{60} It is precisely because in appearing to repudiate death, affecting to ‘sham death, on the pretext of not wanting to see its quietude disturbed’ that the fantasist of immortality:

\[\ldots\text{in fact aspires to it constantly without knowing it}\ldots\text{. Drawing it back to auto-eroticism, absolute primary narcissism seeks the mimetic sleep of death. This is the quest of non-desire for the Other, of non-existence, of non-being; another way of acceding to immortality. The ego is never more immortal than when it claims that it no longer has any organs or body.}\textsuperscript{61}\]

What Green undoes here is the link between autoeroticism in primary narcissism and its apparent object, the body. Instead, the true aim of autoeroticism is the repudiation of the body itself. By this I understand him to be indicating, conversely, the sense in which the self only secures the knowledge of its possession of a body in its recognition as such by another, the way one needs other bodies to both differentiate one’s own and to designate the self as one among many. This is but an aspect of what difference-as-being entails. But to repudiate other bodies is also to repudiate one’s own insofar as the category of the bodily will allow. As the nirvana principle makes clear, to return to the womb is also to reach out for death, to be before and after life.\textsuperscript{62}

If the fantasist of immortality wants rid of the present, with all its myriad encounters with difference, the fantasy also offers an escape from the other. Of course, this is really the same thing: What is it in the experience of being

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., p. 218
\item Ibid., pp. 220-222
\item On the line of Green’s analysis, one is reminded of Judith Butler’s recent reflection on the workings of the death drive ‘in the psychic field we call Trump’. Butler recognises that suicide and triumphant survival are two sides of the same coin, for Green on the other hand one might say that suicide and survival are bound even closer, that, in negative narcissism, the one is the other. Butler, ‘Genius or Suicide’, \textit{London Review of Books}, 41 (2019) \<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n20/judith-butler/genius-or-suicide> [accessed 5 November 2019].
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotes}
that is really so intolerable if not the encounter with the other and otherness? Already abstracted, the East Asian body is duly commodified and made a synecdoche for otherness as a category in the third channel of *BREITBART.RED* (figures 4.10-4.12), as the textual preamble – ‘What you’re seeing at Superdry are codes and signals that are recognizable to people in the scene but not always to outsiders’ – inscribes racial and cultural diversity as insurmountable difference into Uebermorgen’s premise of a paramilitary semiotics. The Superdry brand’s inclusion is of a piece with the well-documented techno-orientalism familiar not just to neoreaction, notably through the writings of ex-academic Nick Land, but cybercultures more generally.63 As a category of difference, race concerns psychoanalysis as a concept which belongs to the lateral axis. It is, in this respect, a legacy of the primal mode of othering which Mitchell traces back to the Law of the Mother. So, when it comes to perhaps the clumsiest section of *BREITBART.RED* it seems permissible to opt for a more resistant mode of interpreting the problem posed by the selection of the channel. For if Green offers no mention of race in his studies on narcissism, he does at least provide a remarkable intervention on the question of gender.

Green gives the term ‘neuter’ to the convergence of gender and death narcissism. Describing the neuter gender as the negative of psychic bisexuality, he theorises an alternative outcome of early psychical conflicts as they are worked through under the pressure of primary narcissism. ‘Neither masculine nor feminine’, the neuter ‘leads the subject’s idealizing and megalomaniac inclinations not towards the fulfillment of sexual desire but towards a longing for a state of psychical nothingness in which being nothingness seems to be the ideal condition of self-sufficiency’.64 The neuter gender thus ensures that ‘totality is safeguarded and lack is denied’.65 We may take ‘lack’ here as the mark of difference, of otherness.66 To this

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65 Ibid., p. 169.
66 As Mitchell writes, the neuter gender sounds ‘the death-knell of sexuality as difference and, with it, bisexuality’. Mitchell, ‘Foreword’, in *Psychic Bisexuality*, pp. xxviii-xix
extent the neuter gender describes a position from which the feminine is both monopolised by, and subsumed into, the masculine position and, in the process, denied. The corollary of ‘no gender’ in this sense is ‘no difference’. Masculinity is thus established as the gender that closes the very category of gender, just as whiteness may be established as the race that forecloses the very category of race.67

It is with the crescendo of each channel at the shield screen-stage (figures 4.16-4.20) that BREITBART.RED gives its most demonstrative performance of a closed system. The images here throb, coming at the viewer with an altogether contrasting mood of intimidation to Gloria Patri’s cold steel. By the constant pulse of the algorithm the shape of the shield also poses a different question of form, more suggestive of an outline that is pressed against the screen in such a way that one might imagine it as something to be pressed onto skin. If this is what the rhetoric of the previous stages in each channel has prepared us for there is room, perhaps, to associate the agricultural, not to mention genocidal, valence of the term ‘branding’. This movement from far to near and near to far disturbs the clean limits of a settled shape but the essence of the shield’s plane remains intact inasmuch as the device affords projection and concealment; the images it houses show themselves and are, at the next moment, hidden. The thrust of this animated shape seems to be less toward organic life – a living shield – than toward hypnosis. The general idea seems to be that the images which mass upon its quadrants would suggest a kind of enchantment of the viewer, transfixing, pacifying or stupefying him (for it is a him) in their onslaught.

Spending time with BREITBART.RED, one starts to realise quite quickly the shallowness of the pool from which these images are drawn. The same ‘Trump’, the same anodyne photograph of a woodland shows up again and

67 As such, there is scope for the neuter gender to sophisticate the reading of the alt-right’s expropriation of gender I pursue in Chapter 1: ‘Wolf Men’. There is also a clear and present consonance here with the dynamic Teixeira Pinto elucidates at the level of race when she writes of accelerationist portrayals of artificial intelligence ‘as a distilled form of white-maleness-without-white-men’. In each case, the move is towards the disavowal and repression of subject positions that fall outside of those which can be occupied by the male hysteric. Teixeira Pinto, ‘Male Fantasies: The Sequel(s)’. 
again. Taken individually they don’t offer much, they only function to buttress a generic type – associating in ways which, in the end, negate the free play of association. One can detect in this categorisation a resonance with the way algorithmic systems manage vast reservoirs of images online. To do this such tools as key word tagging produce taxonomies arranged by type, a system in which the human eye has become entirely superfluous. One is also reminded here, by way of Pontalis, that a social form is not precisely an aesthetic form but that the descriptor may be accurately applied to the forms by which images become social, the systems by which images become memes. In the case of BREITBART.RED, I want to propose that there is an incipient violence which these shield screens hint at in the way such systems are necessarily indiscriminate to finer gradients of difference, to the practice of looking. For these are not just images but pictures even if, as we see them here, one could be forgiven for thinking they really do not exist to be looked at. This, it appears, is what the scene of maximal and perpetual memetic transition brings out. The shields throw up the image in a performance of the memetic image in action, that is, in ceaseless motion. It is inescapable here, though, that we are witness not to a fluid system of dispersion, not to diverse transposition or innovation, but to the endless repetition of the same.68

David Joselit has used the word ‘buzz’ to describe the way digital image saturation ‘indicates a moment of becoming – a threshold at which coherence emerges’.69 On the face of it, this might seem to be an aspiration of this ultimate passage of BREITBART.RED, that point at which meaning is confirmed. At any rate, the shields appear within the dramatic narrative the work scripts as the moment of revelation, as the site of transcendence. And as in scenes of divine witnessing, one can’t look at these pictures, or not at least in a sustained way. They simply move too fast. To be sure, one can wait out the algorithm, patiently accepting, as if before a painfully slow

zoo trope, an extended interval before catching another glimpse when a particular image comes back around. But then one already knows there isn’t much to see there in any case, it isn’t what these images are for. In another essay, Joselit writes of how a new type of image-power is built on ‘populations of images’, that is, images which have the massing power to overwhelm, to swamp, to wield virality as a political force.\textsuperscript{70} He is surely putting it mildly when surmising that such changes imply ‘a shift in how the relationship between politics and art is conceived’.\textsuperscript{71}

Taking Joselit and Apter’s cue to think the memetic image first as a political technology, one can speculate about what kind of formations might make optimal use of this kind of image system. The question calls to mind what Darby English has recently described as ‘the simplification of difference – via color, class, role, political position, or whatever’ into a ‘perspective which vaporizes personhood’.\textsuperscript{72} English notes the propensity of this perspective to ‘flatten our dimensionality’, to erase complexity.\textsuperscript{73} A standpoint such as this, one that brooks no negotiation, confirms a disengagement with difference in favour of synthetic unanimist fantasies. It manifests the way the death drive, in its social forms, works to flatten variability. It wants difference to be less different, indeed it wants difference not to \textit{be} at all. Later in the book which holds this passage English goes on to relate this way of seeing others to the justly admired moment in Simone Weil’s \textit{The Iliad, or the Poem of Force} where she writes of the ‘tiny interval that is reflection’, that interposition of thought which constitutes all that can stay the hand of overwhelming force.\textsuperscript{74} Much is made in the catalogue note for ‘Der Alt Right Komplex’ of \textit{BREITBART.RED}’s capacity to overpower its viewer, its consistency with Benjamin Noys’ account of accelerationism in which ‘reality and its representation is a matter of power and authority – a

\textsuperscript{70} On this question Joselit recognises that, entangled in the ‘exploitative forms’ by which such images populate, ‘art’s power is necessarily negative’. Joselit, \textit{After Art}, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{72} Darby English, \textit{To Describe a Life: Notes from the Intersection of Art and Race Terror} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), p. 20.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
matter of will’. Unlike in *Gloria Patri*, where we might imagine reflection intervening modestly in the ethical space Bhabha finds in a lateral movement, the shields of *BREIBATRED* seem closed to such possibilities. For what else does the fantasy of immortality we find in accelerationism surface than a desire to both overwhelm and be overwhelmed? A fantasy underwritten by the radical negativity of the drive which, to borrow Weil’s words, ‘makes a thing of whoever submits to it […] it makes the human being a thing quite literally, that is, a dead body’. ‘Someone was there and, the next moment, no one’. In the presence of this force the subject is frozen. Ossified, she turns ‘into stone’.

In a recent issue of *Third Text* dedicated to the subject of anti-fascist art theory, Larne Abse Gogarty reminds us of fascism’s well-established attraction to novel technologies on the basis of their association with the inorganic. The affirmation which Foster recognised in the same CNN broadcasts Kelly transcribes on the shields, amplified the psychic mechanism which makes use of the machine as an armor. But, as the two faces of the shield might remind us, the flip side of the carapace is that encasing the self’s limits often presupposes the elimination of threats, which is to say, the elimination of others. This is very much along the lines of Lacan’s thought when he talks about a nacreous covering splitting off the masculine subject from his milieu. The shield, as Auden implies in his

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75 Noys, ‘Accelerationism as will and representation’, in *The Future of the New: Artistic Innovation in Times of Social Acceleration*, ed. by Thijs Lijster (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018), pp. 85-99 (p. 97). For Inke Arns, the curator of ‘Der Alt Right Komplex’, the very ‘goal [of *BREIBATRED*] is to overwhelm the visitor’, constituting an ‘immersive project based on maximum overpowering and usurpation’. Arns, p. 79.

76 Weil, p. 6.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., p. 7.

79 Gogarty speaks of the 1930s ‘fantasy of ‘metallising’ the human body, mimicking the technology which transformed the world they found themselves in, in order to act as a kind of stimulus shield’. This comes in response to Angela Dimitrakaki’s insisting that: ‘at this point we need to grasp the links of possibly a transnational turn to authoritarianism as a pillar of fascism, this is because the core of capitalist globalisation is technological. The fascism that gave us the Holocaust was also technological, as it deployed technology to organise mass deaths of designated subjects. Technology-based biopolitics and necropolitics have been the order of modernity overall. But historical analysis, to which art theory is necessarily tied, requires us to differentiate, to attend to the specificities of technologies in use and their connection to the political reality and its imaginaries’. Gogarty, Dimitrakaki and Vishmidt, pp. 454-456.
remarkable poem about Achilles, is indeed a weapon.\textsuperscript{80} I suggest that it is at this fascistic trope that \textit{Gloria Patri} and \textit{BREITBART.RED} meet, at masculinity becoming pathological in harness with the technological affordances a particular historical moment has provided.

Of course, the ways and means by which Kelly and Ubermorgen address fascism’s relation to new technological forms could hardly be more different. To be sure, the question of whether one serves up a critique of the problem in hand and the other its amplification remains open. But whilst I have maintained throughout this discussion that closing this question is not my aim here, it strikes me that there is a dynamic to the pairing of these works which betrays my best attempts to refuse answering it. What vexes Teixeira Pinto and Stakemeier is the unwitting collusion of apparently parodic transgressions. Parody, as already noted, is a modality legible to the operations of camouflage. Lacan reminds us that camouflage is not about being fully present or wholly absent, it is an operation which unfixes those conditions – as something appears in one register of meaning it may cease to be legible in another. I would pause to consider this play between surfacing and receding on the temporal level of memory, whereby if a gambit of this discussion is to pull \textit{Gloria Patri} into the attention of the present, that movement is countermanded by the way \textit{BREITBART.RED}, once juxtaposed to Kelly’s work, returns to the discursive moment of the Gulf War. There is, in other words, a sort of rhythm to this oscillation between the then and the now by which these two works afford a contingent level of visibility, before or behind or side by side.

But how does bringing two shield works together impact what we can take away from the shield as a peculiarly associative object? I have tarried with several of the object’s connotations, what they load onto the surface, the suggestiveness of this thing as a form. A final thought in this direction is that the meeting of two shields does not always have to be thought through

configurations of display. What I have in mind here is the idea of a clash, the moment at which two forces, objects, things, meet. This scene sets the shield to work, it ceases to be only an object of display and becomes one of action. It asks, what kind of contact, of touch, does one want analysis to make possible. Two shields side by side would more likely, as Kelly knows, make us think of the showing of the shield, the various formations which present closed systems predicated on the narrowing of entry points, the refusal of foreign elements, the exposure and paradoxical denial of the body’s vulnerability. But face to face, head-on, in contact, fully disclosed to each other, two shields in combat or in dialogue accommodate energy flows; sparks may fly, the scope of each object will be uneven, the differences specific to their object-ness, their incommensurability, will assert themselves, sameness will not stand. Construing the shield less as a device for display but instead for conduction or convection, as a site where things contact, would, I think, retrieve something of the way that certain objects dissolve distance. Distance, that is, in both temporal and spatial terms, in the remoteness of past moments as well as the alienation of mediatised relations.

Much of what I think can be gained by putting Gloria Patri and BREITBART.RED into contact has to do with this aspiration. Not just the way that Gloria Patri seems to anticipate and expand what it is that BREITBART.RED can reveal about its own subject in its own time, but how the latter work might act on the former. The hope would be that the later work helps make Gloria Patri more present in this moment, or rather recognised as a potential tool by which to think through our current situation. For the somewhat uncertain critical response to Gloria Patri relative to Kelly’s previous major works comprises a neglect which can only serve to mute the installation’s present relevance to a resurgence of the conditions it sets out to address. 81 This would involve an unfastening from

81 In comparison to the critical response afforded Interim and Post-Partum Document, the literature on Gloria Patri is sparse. The significant exceptions are, largely, all cited above. Following Nixon’s characterisation of a ‘critical silence’ in relation to Nancy Spero’s The War series, one could suggest that the intimate address Gloria Patri makes to masculinity
the situation of its making and a refastening to our own. To an important extent, it is precisely the reasons Kelly cites for this subdued reception – her move to address masculinity, her engagement with militarism, her lateral moves – that pull the work into the present.82 Thus, strange as the coupling with BREITBART.RED might undoubtedly seem, two projects by artists whose practices could scarcely be more incompatible, it is hoped that the connection helps close the lag that the foresight of Gloria Patri sets up.

In closing, I want to begin again with the stories on Kelly’s shields. I do not mean the narratives themselves so much as the way they present the impression of words into a surface. In photographic documentation of the work it is easy to take the industrially precise clarity of the bold text to indicate that the words have been printed onto, rather than etched into, the surface of the steel. I would argue that this distinction is important, it marks the one instance where the shield accommodates a permissiveness of depth. It disturbs the binary of recto and verso. The stories, full of interior thoughts, thereby intervene in the field of its materiality. Language finds space inside the object, a negative space, to be sure, but it is speech which punctures the shield’s austere plane; language finds a relation, a dialogue with the steel that is immediate, that asserts its own materiality. Composed on the shield, the words trace the bodies they disclose in a way that goes beyond mere textual description. By this incision the stories disturb the severity and ‘horrific shininess’ which almost made Kelly sick.

It is characteristic of hysteria, or hysterical speech, that words become things and as things they enter into a different relation to the body. The ethical relation Bhabha describes in Gloria Patri is predicated on the movement of the body; the turn of the head, the opening to contingency, the imposition of what is adjacent that might disrupt the violence of the full-frontal relation. It

and militarism have perhaps provided another example of ‘the neglect that attends representations of war sexuality’. Nixon, ‘Minimal Difference’, p. 198.

82 In view of the increasingly troubled discourse around contemporary art’s engagements with masculinity, new technological forms and mimetic strategies, Gloria Patri provides a salutary model for responding to these conjunctions without submitting to a putative ‘right turn’ or ‘nihilistic capitulation’.
is not dissimilar from what, in an essay written shortly before his text on *Gloria Patri*, Bhabha calls peripherality; a ‘displacing and disjunctive instance’ which, ‘in a twisted temporality’, disrupts the limits and boundaries of that which it has already set.83 Peripherality would thus be what both circumscribes and breaks the halted moment I suggest marks the moment of encounter with death narcissism in the installation, an encounter which I propose joins these two works. But in *BREITBART.RED*’s privatised spectacle, for all the constant movement of text and image, nothing ever holds still other than the body itself. One is, to borrow, Leo Steinberg’s phrase, ‘alone with this thing’.84 In the negotiation with *Gloria Patri* one may be fixed by the gaze, gripped by the drive, in the precinct of strong forces, but still, even if for a fleeting moment, the expansive possibilities of looking sideways interpose.

CONCLUSION

As Mitchell puts it, ‘psychoanalytic theory uses the bright colours of pathology as seen in the clinic to grasp the duller shades of the normative’.¹ I have suggested throughout this thesis that such is the glimmer of possibility alt-right examples provide to say something of the psychic work memes perform. More than this, I have claimed that memes inhere in the historical conjuncture of our moment’s spectacle of digitally mediated violence, that they are a technology by which masculinity-becoming-pathological is surfaced in ways that expose hysteria as a condition of the social and its formations. In this, they join a history of devices which are resonant with, and reflect of, psychic economies, offering vehicles for the expression and investment of fantasy.

Impacted by the alt-right’s florid hysteria, their memes present an opportunity to pursue an analogy with psychoanalytic method. They do so in large part because of the peculiar way memes represent the communication and development of ideas through association, a process which, in a psychoanalytic context, is immediately suggestive of the

¹ Mitchell, ‘Psychoanalysis, siblings and the social group’, p. 64.
unconscious at work. Freud’s task was to be attentive to the scenes his patients’ associations constructed and covered for, scenes created by ideas which informed the way fantasy shapes reality. Ideas in the unconscious are at a different level of thinking than that we employ in waking life and dreams thus offer one way of accessing their otherwise hidden content. Yet dreams are illusions, formed and powered by the strength of a wish or anxiety. In his later work Freud considered the way illusions operated at the level of the social, most notably in the survival of religiosity in an age of science. But where religion tends to prefer the unchanging and the eternal, memes, we are told, celebrate innovation, subversion, the mutation and inversion of ideas. In this respect, they present the formal mechanisms of dream-work – condensation, displacement, secondary revision – in action. It is the quality of memes these mechanisms provide for which is invoked when we speak about the profusion of echo-chambers online, the algorithmic corraling of social relations into digital gated communities. For if memes play a role in the contestation and assertion of identity it is because they are overactive in limning the borders between self and other, in-group and out-group. Their formal procedures as a medium manifest the coded articulations of a subject position and the performance of a standpoint. And yet for this work they provide a clumsy instrument. For all their innovations, memes are recursive, they lean heavily on the archetype. Operating in a media environment where ruminative thought is ever more scarce, they tend to the immediate and the affective, generalising finely braided differences.

Because they so often present images, either literally or by textual signification, memes provide a resource for thinking these problems through visual analysis. In establishing the relations these composite and combinatory images bear to other images and ideas and how their novel assembly may rework or alter those relations, a meme may be opened up onto pasts which exceed the narrower frames of reference they explicate at the surface. So being attentive to the psychic work of memes as group

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images and images of the group entails much more than tracking the sprawling evolution of a motif. Given the collective means of production of any particular meme, this means expanding and complicating an already tangled web of signifiers. What histories are inscribed in a meme are not organised with the kind of systematic coherence one might find in an artist’s practice but through the impulsive polyphony of the group as an unconscious. Memes, in other words, are messy. Still, the multiplicity of memes, their plenitude and disposability weigh heavy on analyses that aspire to going further than iconography. Their media condition resists the slower sort of looking which finds time to attend to the underside of things, to what memes carry in spite of themselves. In the preceding chapters the aspiration to take this approach has led me to entertain at some length what might be gained from juxtapositions which, to some degree, are themselves suggestive of a memetic idiom: net.art and Mary Kelly, surrealism and the Wolves of Vinland make for an unlikely collection of sources, testament to the unpredictable, volatile and often unstable field of memetic activity. Yet the power of memes, certainly in a political sense, lies in part in their faculty to fashion a perspective on what such connections add up to. In the same way in which anything could potentially become a meme, anything is available as a memetic reference so long as it can be provisionally reduced to a fixed value. At the level of temporality therefore, one might say that memes erase the textures of historical distance. If memes are inter-subjective inasmuch as they are active in the relations between individuals and groups, then similarly they play with precious little friction between ‘the here and the now’ and ‘the there and the then’.

If memetic velocity and volatility applies one kind of pressure to my analysis, unfolding events in the political realm since 2016 have posed their own challenges to thinking critically about the dimensionality of alt-right memes. Since this thesis was conceived and completed, the alt-right has generated a vast and still expanding terrain of analysis and speculation in

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3 As English has acutely observed, ‘a crisis in culture is a crisis in thought. Confusion is par for the course’. English, To Describe a Life, p. 4.
response to a welter of outrages presided over by a president the alt-right claim to have elected as a meme. Against which, what we mean by the alt-right has been far from stable, any perspective one might cling to is inevitably changing and partial – there is no stepping outside the effects of this particular object. Within the movement certain aspects have gained ground, the QAnon conspiracy, for example, emphasising a deep seam of paranoia which, in the context of the United States in particular, carries its own wealth of sub-histories. Others have faded: 4chan no longer plays the same central role it once did and has introduced some censorship guidelines; the site’s off-shoot, 8chan, has been relieved of protection by the secure hosting service Cloudflare, Twitter has started tagging the President’s tweets. Yet prominent alt-right associates are embedded in the United States administration and the kind of male hysteria an alt-right sensibility espouses has been institutionally legitimated as a political modality across large parts of the world. So, whilst the situation has hardly become less congealed, frameworks which organise objects and events into psychic or political histories have been ever more indispensable. Such tools for looking and thinking bring into relief the cycles and repetitions that provide analysis with some welcome touchstones, some points of clarity between which disparate reflections find their place amidst an otherwise turbulent and opaque over-proximity to the problems at hand. Most often these are provided by a theory or an artist’s practice, at other times they come from the most unexpected directions. Just in advance of November’s election, an event which promises one measure of hindsight on the last four years, the coronavirus pandemic has provided an unforeseen vantage on what it means to talk of virality, fantasy and the drives in our present moment.

Writing in the early British summer of 2020 one is permitted, in lieu of more habitual liberties, a sense of perspective on the momentum, accelerated in recent years but building for centuries, away from in-person encounter. The experience of lockdown has posed the question of what new technologies afford for being or not being with others as an everyday reality, it has focused the way certain devices mediate in place of physical proximity. In reminding us of the lethal valence of virality, the pandemic
has effected a particular kind of unbinding of the social even as it demonstrates the degree to which planetary life is so intensely interconnected. In intimacies, coauthored with Leo Bersani, Adam Phillips considers how we might think through Freud’s death drive in relation to the practice of being close with others. Intimacy, in this reading, is embedded in narcissism and thus brings into view the demands we place on others to consolidate selfhood. Narcissism is spelt out as ‘suicidal self-love’, ‘the ultimately self-destructive will to master the world’. It is a conception intimate, one might say, to Green’s theory of negative narcissism. Phillips writes: ‘Freud’s notion of a death drive was, I think, one way of saying this: we want to die, and whether or not we want to we will’. As he formulates it, Phillips gets to the sharp end of the point: desire, ‘want’, in the last analysis is secondary and subordinate to the ‘will’ of the drive. What I think Phillips’ invitation to rethink what binds and unbinds us to and from others along the lines of an ‘impersonal intimacy’ can speak to in our present moment is caught up with the privations our broader social formations entail. These demand an attention to the way we reconceptualise connectedness through the more difficult questions psychoanalysis asks us to confront at a moment in which the stakes of such endeavours are clear. Thus, where these chapters start by thinking about investment in objects, it ends on the theme of disinvestment in the subject. As Mitchell herself has suggested, negative narcissism is a pathology attuned to our times.

Negative narcissism has also been taken up as a lens by which to read the rise of the alt-right and the election of Trump by Silvia Kolbowski in a work that cuts through the same disorienting fog of fast-moving events which have challenged the writing of this thesis. That Monster: An Allegory, 2018 (figures 5.1-5.3), is a video work constructed from an edit of James Whale’s

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4 Phillips is here quoting Bersani from the previous chapter. Bersani and Adam Phillips, intimacies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 103. Phillips comes closest to Green’s conception of negative narcissism in a passage where he insists that ‘the ego’s narcissistic forms of self-preservation are the ways it destroys itself’. Ibid., p. 98.
6 This suggestion was made as a response to the screening of Silvia Kolbowski’s That Monster on the 10th of April 2019 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, organised by Nixon, Kari Rittenbach, and Steven Cairn.
1935 *The Bride of Frankenstein*. Or rather, it is two videos, or the same video played twice. The first time around the footage, punctuated by thinly edited textual fragments, is accompanied by Philip Glass’ *Metamorphosis I* and *II*. The second time around the same edit is played in silence. This unusual format suggests we think in terms of positive and negative, recto and verso. The film, *That Monster*, is split. Mary Shelley’s novel is, of course, an ideal reference point for destabilising the notion of a monolithic and secure selfhood, famous for the popular confusion of the monster for the doctor who creates him. (Kolbowski deftly transfers this association to questions of gender by opting to focus on the sequel rather than Whale’s 1931 movie.) Further, the artist keeps open the question of: Who is it we are naming here, who is *that* monster? The answer is not going be definitive, as in the novel the lead role is a surrogate for any number of theories: Is *that* monster Trump? A wrecking ball bent on destruction, a parody of a monstrous masculinity created by the enthrallment to, and hubristic abuse of, novel technologies. Is it, perhaps, the electorate who desire the destruction wreaked by the monster? Or is it instead the drive itself? An inorganic force set against, rather than of, nature.

In doubling or splitting the video, Kolbowski points us in the direction of psychosis rather than neurosis and this seems crucial for the relation between the one and the many, desire and death on which her allegory of our moment rests. ‘Where the family leads to a line that goes between normality and neurosis, the social group posits a continuation between the

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7 As Kolbowski has put it: ‘my motivation in *That Monster* was to situate Trump as a symptom of decades of economic injustice, and look through an allegorical lens at one effect of those decades — the millions of voters who became psychically enthralled to a demagogic power that doesn’t serve their interests […] the key question for me is why 30-40 million Americans (his so-called die-hard base, not the wealthy who saw an opportunity for deregulation and tax cuts) fell in thrall to such a sick person? […] humans are the only species that will follow an unstable leader. They are also the only species with an unconscious. Centrists and left-liberals in the U.S. point to the chaos that Trump continuously creates, and they see it as indicative of ineffectuality. But that chaos is extremely effective at a psychical level’. Silvia Kolbowski, ‘That Monster: A Conversation About Politics and the Psyche’, *silviakolbowski*blog, 20 June 2019 <https://silviakolbowski*blog.com/2019/06/20/that-monster-a-conversation-about-politics-and-the-psyche/> [accessed 3 April 2020].
normal and the psychotic’ writes Mitchell.\(^8\) It is our ‘lateral relations that organise the psychotic into the social’\(^9\) In providing this video with its mirror image, Kolbowski asks us to consider an expanded conception of narcissism, one with a capacity to speak to the complex of dynamics which hold the social together as well as push it apart. The script Kolbowski plays as intertitles between scenes has been shorn of all pronouns other than ‘I’ and ‘you’ but it would be a mistake to construe the exclusion of ‘we’, ‘us’ or ‘they’ as evacuating any reference to a broader field of relations. Rather, what Kolbowski is signaling here is a breakdown in the negotiation of the social’s more complex and textured terms. One might think of it as a regression toward to the extended period of infancy after the acquisition of ‘me’ (and thus, ‘not me’) but before the more complex pronouns are graspable. The use of language thus mirrors the formal division of the work, suggesting a meaning within the dualism of the drives. What is it that we miss in the noise of the first showing that is revealed in the silence of its repeat?\(^10\) Whatever it is, one has to start from the conviction that the story of Frankenstein’s monster is not about creating life, artificial or otherwise, but the inexorable pursuit of death and, as we have seen, for Green this is precisely what the fantasy of immortality encrypts.

Concluding this thesis with a discussion of That Monster allows me to close on the way Kolbowski brings negative narcissism into dialogue with a clear thematic of male hysteria. Frankenstein’s monsters are of course ‘born’ parthenogenetically, allegories for the entanglement of masculinity and novel technologies, not coincidentally penned by a woman. In Whale’s film the title character appears for a mere ten seconds but the bride gets a lot more screen time in That Monster where her repeated appearance seems to emphasise this prior absence, to make it present. In the all-consuming

\(^8\) Mitchell, ‘Siblings and the Psychosocial’, Organisational & Social Dynamics, 14 (2014), 1-12 (p. 1).

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 5.

\(^10\) Of a previous work, After Hiroshima Mon Amour, Rosalyn Deutsch has likened Kolbowski’s use of silence to unsynchronized text from image to the ‘immobilization of those suffering from psychic trauma’. Whilst it is not trauma which is directly at stake in That Monster, I am reminded here of Pontalis’ evocation of the silent register of the death drive. Rosalyn Deutsche, Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 15.
passion for violence of the male leads, the woman’s place is barely 
recognised and this, the video suggests, is inextricable from the shame and 
self-disgust which cuts that monster off from the social. Is her erasure in 
Whale’s film and her haunting of That Monster another iteration of the 
classically fascist trope of the feminine within, or does the bride’s equal 
billing here suggest the need for new models to interrogate and represent the 
psychic underpinning of gender domination on the lateral axis?11 Indeed the 
etanglement of these two pathological categories – negative narcissism and 
male hysteria – and their capacity to speak to what I describe in my 
introduction as the psychic resonances of digital ecologies and 
technological affordances given shape by current political and social 
formations marks the point from which I hope this thesis could be more 
fully developed.

In a trilogy of films which preceded That Monster, Kolbowski cut across 
certain historical moments loaded with the trauma of political violence.12 
The artist’s use of psychoanalytic techniques, theories and situations as 
frameworks for encountering past events in the present is well noted in the 
critical literature on her practice.13 In regard to the treatment of history in 
one of those three films, Hiroshima Mon Amour, Rosalyn Deutsche has 
observed how ‘the past isn’t simply there to be recovered; past events and 
actions are what will have happened as history mutates’.14 It is, then, 
through a psychoanalytic conception of temporality by which the agency of 
particular moments is grasped, by which a perspective is granted on how 
pathologies inhere in social institutions, and by which Kolbowski can fully 
engage in answering the question to which the production of That Monster 
was addressed: ‘What psychosocial dynamics arose from and sustain our 
current economic and political situation?’15 In her work, the past is, to use

11 It is worth noting that Kolbowski and Mitchell follow each other’s work.
12 A Few Howls Again (2010), Like a Clap of Thunder (2015), and After Hiroshima Mon 
13 See, for example, Nixon, ‘On the Couch’, October, 113 (2005), 39-76 (pp. 71-76); 
Kolbowski, Nixon, Foster, Deutsche and others, Silvia Kolbowski: inadequate ... Like ... 
Power (Vienna: Secession, 2004); and Deutsche, Hiroshima After Iraq, pp. 9-32.
14 Deutsche, p. 22.
an apt term, reanimated. The source comes to life, as it were, not exactly as a spectre but as a present and active force. By such means is psychic reality, that is, the subjective reality produced under the weight of repressed psychical structures and unconscious processes, mobilised to elaborate political realities. The compositing of the various legacies Kolbowski locates in her films generates richly palimpsestic texts which do not point so much to the act of repetition, as much as to the rhythm of repetition as a process overlapping itself.

Working within what Deutsche has called ‘the time of psychic life’, at the heart of Kolbowski’s attitude to history is an absolute refusal of the separateness of events. Rather, crises bleed into one another. It will be clear by now that such a perspective on connectedness is strongly advocated by this thesis and a prerequisite for developing the arguments it makes for apprehending the psychic dynamics of the alt-right within a historical context. Undergirding the claims made above is a call for the place of psychoanalysis in critically addressing the range of practices, both social and aesthetic, which characterise the digital. Despite a turn from the digital in psychoanalytically informed art history, the field remains a site from which such work might be conceived. As more than one of the case studies in this thesis suggest, the role of artistic practice can be crucial in shifting the terms of critique when it comes to reactionary projects laying claim to art history’s privileged objects and discourses. It is not enough to contest these appropriations through analyses which ask only ‘how the art field is implicated – in terms of collusion or resistance – to the diffusion of ‘fascist traits’’ if such critical interrogation stops short of elaborating these ‘traits’

16 Kolbowski writes: ‘I was then drawn to Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel, because of its prescience. It is the prescient figure who intrigues me, because prescience indicates an unceamnily clear vision when others need more temporal distance for clarity’. Ibid.
17 As Freud reminds us, psychic reality is, in this sense, a psychopathology of everyday life: ‘one must never allow oneself to be misled into applying the standards of reality to repressed psychical structures, and on that account, perhaps, into undervaluing the importance of phantasies in the formation of symptoms on the ground that they are not actualities [...] One is bound to employ the currency that is in use in the country one is exploring – in our case a neurotic currency’. Freud, ‘Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning’, 1911, in SE, vol. xii, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1958), pp. 213-226 (p. 225).
18 Deutsche, Hiroshima After Iraq, p. 23
as expressive of the desires, anxieties, undertows and pathologies they bear.\textsuperscript{19} It is not enough, in other words, for art history to retain only the critical tools of Marxist and feminist analysis when it comes to digital art. Present circumstances would seem to demand that interrogation of the nature of our present fascism, or whatever one calls it, would need to proceed by terms which accommodate a theory and vocabulary of subjectivity which marshals the radical implications of a conflicted unconscious and the force of the drives.

Aiming at what I perceived to be a blind spot in the literature on the alt-right, there is much that my approach, leaning on dream-work, male hysteria, the group and negative narcissism, has obscured or passed over. At several points in this thesis the limits of a reliance on psychoanalytic theory to grasp the historicity and complex materiality of digital items, their relation to other digital forms and the protocols and software which give them shape, will be clearly visible. Looking back, my interest in exploring what Mitchell’s conception of a lateral axis and the currency of horizontality in digital cultures might say to one another may have mutated from a facilitator to an inhibitor of thinking. That is to say, the dialogue between these two iterations may have foreclosed opportunities to dwell at greater length and with more freedom in the kind of resonances of which the third chapter is an example. Still, the conviction that such a project was necessary has been regularly spurred by unfolding events and the daily performances of male hysteria our media environment relentlessly distributes. By this measure too, it is fitting in all the worst ways that this thesis should turn from male hysteria to the death drive within the parenthesis of an election cycle which threatens to end a presidency amidst the pandemic’s grotesque and impersonal arithmetic. Thus, against the backdrop of a mounting investment in reconceptualising precarity and ecology at the intersection of technology and what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing has called our ‘capitalist

\textsuperscript{19} Dimitrakaki and Weeks, pp.276-277.
ruins’, a return to Freud’s still contested drive theory feels an appropriate endpoint for this thesis.20

Reigniting and recasting psychoanalytic vocabularies within discourses of the digital is a vast challenge, no matter how legible the symptoms may be. Keeping pace with new technological forms and evolving theoretical frameworks in ways attentive to their psychic implications is undoubtedly a substantial challenge. Yet, as my readings of memes has laboured to suggest, psychoanalysis provides vocabularies for the type of resistant analysis which the stakes of our present political situation surely compel. Resistant in ways which might to start to loosen the sway over our mediotechnological imagination and the devices which spark it by milieus of tech speculators. Whilst it may be a struggle to imagine too many programmers reading *The Interpretation of Dreams* seriously, shying away from reinvigorating the implications of Freud’s project risks leaving the illusions of our media environment and their discontents intact. If we are in the grip of a new nightmare politics psychoanalysis has before provided a means of making sense of its apparently inexplicable appeal.21 For if there is anything serious to be said about memes, it will surely start from taking the way they ‘illustrate the thrust of the drive’ seriously.22 Seriously enough, that is, to contest the implications of what Apter notes as ‘their predication on impersonal intimacy’.23 From there the outlines of a new project might just start to take shape.


22 Apter, p. 5.

23 Ibid., p. 7.


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https://breitbart.red

The Libertarian-to-Far-Right pipeline is a real thing.

Me one year ago
I guess I would consider myself a center-right libertarian but I don't really like conforming to specific labels. My own personal views tend to lean more towards the right but I believe everyone has the right to live how they want and do what makes them happy without government interference. Oh, and taxation is theft haha.

Me today
We need to overthrow the government, implement a clerical fascist regime, and begin mass executing these Marxist degenerates if we want any chance of a functioning society in the future.
Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

"@codyave: @drudgereport @BreitbartNews @WitteinTrump "You Can't Stump the Trump"
youtube.com/watch?v=MKH3PA... pic.twitter.com/IF6S05se2w"

4:53 AM - 13 Oct 2015
Please fuck my country

Mexico

#cuckservative
3.1

3.2
Hey what happened?
I think I'm dead
YOU KILLED ME !!!!!!
You clicked on me !!!
Why do you have to click on buttons
before you know what's behind ???
You are a killer.
Oh, my god... I'm so sad to be dead
It's a dreadful sorrow

Only a minute ago
I was happily flying over your plate
and
now
I'm
dead

BUT HOW CAN I WRITE THIS SINCE I'M DEAD ???
TELL ME!!!
Finally, I can come that close to you.
Do you also want to come that close to me?
Yes / No /
Put your check on the monitor.
How does it feel?

Want to know what my tongue tastes like?
Try it on your own and tell me.

Record your account.

3.8

3.9
First she made sure the thigh pads were in the right position, then she went into a funk. Where was the lever and why was she sweating even before she’d started? She despised it. Despised the woman-thing, the soft thing that severed her will before a hard thing, hard to do, hard to touch, hard to understand like the machine in front of her. If only she could cut it off, cut off her sexuality and kill it. Maybe she could find the adductor adjustment device and set it to the appropriate range. She placed one leg at a time on the movement arms of the apparatus, making sure to keep her inner thighs firmly against the resistance pads and her shoulders square. After that, she fastened her seat belt and prepared to inflict severe damage on her flabby gams. Her body tensed, muscles hardened, resolve hardening. Search and destroy the flaccid hyle. Knees pried apart in compliance with an ancient rule, she forced them together slowly, deliberately refusing her allotted place and held her new position hard and fast. Yes, fast and hardheaded, she’d think in tough metaphors and eject tight sentences in stringent tones, change her hair, her clothes and her name, of course – from Mary Lou to Louis, or perhaps M.L. After all, it was a free country, a free world, a free market and she was free to free herself of her diocessian destiny. Returning to the stretch position she began again. Deploy her assets. Project power. Pull with her thighs and not her lower legs. Fit in. Weigh in at the right weight and defeat her rivals. She breathed out heavily. Heartfelt? Not at all, she told herself. It was a hard life. What she had was hard-earned and, if anyone objected, well, that was, she spat on the floor, hard luck.
4.5

...LETTING LOOSE AND HITTING 'EM WITH ALL WE GOT...
Using ASMR technique we transport you to future frontiers of perception, selection, technology and supremacy.

Ian Response

A phenomenon.

Users experience a tingling sensation across the scalp and the back of the neck in response to

1. TAKE A DEEP BREATH
2. MOVE YOUR MOUSE
3. ENVISION A WHITE COLD CLEAN NORDIC FUTURE
4. FEEL THE STRENGTH OF YOUR BLOOD
5. FOCUS AND ENLIGHTEN YOURSELF
is back and we’ve got the hoodies to prove it. The intention is to support young men constructing their.

And NOW season is here – and we could not be more.

1. BE EXCITED JUMPER SEASON IS HERE
2. MOVE YOUR MOUSE
3. CREATE CODES AND SIGNALS
4. MASTER MULTIPLE IDENTITIES
5. FOCUS AND THINK POLITICAL
because of the apparent lack of African rhythmic influences it is music of all time.

can hurt so much more than .

Makes one miss something he never had.

4.13

ACCEPT YOUR DEEP SADNESS ALL THE DISTANT AND BLURRED MEMORY

⑤ WELCOME

4.14

4.15
This is a story about a monster.

Even if I destroy myself.
That monster over there.

5.3