

# THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE VIRULENT(ly) SELF(ish)

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## SESSION 1: *The self as meme.*

04.09.2020

### Participants:

*Jonathan Agins, Jonathan Bratt, Garrett Laroy Johnson, Muindi Fanuel Muindi, Ylfa Muindi, Xin Wei Sha*

### Readings:

- ❑ "[Memes: the new replicators](#)", from *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins
- ❑ "[Technologies of the Self](#)" from *Technologies of the Self: Lectures at University of Vermont Oct. 1982* by Michel Foucault

***By the time the session was over everything had been called into question.*** From memes to genes, from genes to units of agency, from units of agency to the very notion of causal efficacy at the heart of Western metaphysics. It seems like we will not be taking anything for granted from the outset of this project. As we continue on this journey together, the self shall have to prove itself again and again at every juncture, to prove that it can account for anything beyond itself.

It was suggested that genes and memes were "homunculi theories". In other words, the self wants to believe that genes and memes are the protagonists in biological narratives and in cultural narratives, respectively, because the self sees itself in genes and memes, and, hubristically, the self believes that it, or something like it, must be the protagonist of any and every sort of narrative. But what if genes and memes aren't the protagonists in biological and cultural narratives? Indeed, mustn't we question the very notion that there are biological and cultural narratives with protagonists? What if biology and culture are less narratological and more lyrical, tonal, timbral, textural, rhythmic, figural, gestural, architectural, etc.?

The self sees itself clearly reflected in the narratological and, as a result, the self likes to describe and explain narratologically, using narratives that feature protagonists like itself. The self does not see itself clearly reflected in the lyrical, the tonal, the timbral, the textural, the rhythmic, the figural, the gestural, the architectural, etc. — And so the self *discounts and disavows* descriptions and explanations that are not narratological but lyrical, tonal, timbral, textural, rhythmic, figural, gestural, architectural, etc.

*So that we don't let our "selves" take advantage as we inquire into the problem of the self, we must not assume narratological descriptions and explanations! We must, instead, try the narratological alongside/against the lyrical, tonal, timbral, textural, rhythmic, figural, gestural, architectural, and/or others.*

We discussed some of these alternative descriptions and explanations by looking into Daoist philosophy, schizoanalysis, autocatalytic metabolic processes, the protoplasmic evolutionary continuum, architectural operations, fabrics, general relativity, quantum mechanics, the evolution of prokaryotic and eukaryotic bacteria, and, last but not least, *the difference that characterizes what goes into a musical performance and what is written in a musical score*. In the end, we remarked that genes, memes, and selves were, at best, biological, cultural, and psychological scores, respectively. To account for different biological, cultural, and psychological events by referring only to genes, memes, and selves, respectively, is like accounting for musical events, e.g., different performances of Beethoven's 9th, by referring only to a musical score and discounting the importance of the different instruments and instrumentalists, the different ensembles and their histories (NY Phil or Berliner Philharmoniker?), the different conductors and their styles (Bernstein or Karajan?), the different concert venues, the different rehearsal regimes, the different audiences, the different

recording practices, the different performance dates, etc. Ay, but the significance of the musical score, the gene, the meme, and the self must not be hastily discounted and disavowed.

We got around to the Foucault text here and there, and we remarked upon how the genius of Foucault's approach to discussing technologies of the self was that it didn't take the self for granted by assuming causal efficacies. We'll emulate and rival Foucault's genius moving forward. We mentioned Peter Sloterdijk's book on anthropotechnics, *You Must Change Your Life*, as a work emulates and rivals Foucault's genius in this regard and goes further.

Another problem that was mentioned a number of times during our discussion was the problem of the mirror, the instrument of self-reflection, and the problem of engaging in self-reflection, playing the instrument of self-reflection. This will be *the* central topic of concern during Session 2: "The mirror as archetypal technology of self."

## SESSION 2:

### *The mirror [test] as archetypal technology of self.*

04.15.2020

#### Participants:

Jonathan Agins, Jonathan Bratt, Garrett Laroy Johnson, Muindi Fanuel Muindi, Nat Mengist, Tim Wells

#### Readings:

- ❑ ["The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function"](#) by Jacques Lacan
- ❑ ["Self-Recognition in Animals"](#) by Gordon G. Gallup Jr. and James R. Anderson
- ❑ ["Fish, mirrors, and a gradualist perspective on self-awareness"](#) by Frans de Waal

We began by acknowledging the Herculean task that Jonathan Agins undertook for us all and the results that he achieved. Last session we arrived as strangers with no common language, communicating with indexical utterances and gestures. This time, thanks to Jon's lexicon, we spoke to one another using symbolic language. In many ways, the difference between the first session and the second session recreated a phenomenon that Lacan described in the article that we read together during this session, ["The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function"](#). The last session was all about what Lacan called "paranoiac alienation" or what Descartes called "hyperbolic doubt": everything about the self was called into question. Jon Agins responded to our first session by adapting the role Descartes-cum-Lacan to our predicament, by asserting the "truth" of the subject: *we doubt the self, therefore we think the self, and thereby we discover the self as a discursive object, as a **communicable** [viral pun intended] object of knowledge*. Going further, Jon noted that we doubted, thought, and discovered the self in four different ways during the last session: metaphysically, genealogically, semantically, and culturally-historically. Ay, but Jon's invocation of the Cartesian cogito was a qualified invocation. From the outset, Jon recognized that the self that we doubted, thought, and discovered was a metaphysical fiction, and Jon asked *why and whither such a fiction?* Dropping gauntlet, so to speak, Jon made the following proposal:

Assuming that we all share the Nietzschean-Deleuzian [critique of the metaphysical "self"] [...] I propose that we inquire into two opposed types of discourses that can emerge from the critique of the metaphysical "self" as a "fiction:" its *practical* affirmation as a an empowering heuristic construction and its *practical* negation as a debilitating dogma—which technologies of production, signification, power, and self-shaping do these two alternatives enable and inhibit?

The group accepted the proposal, with Garrett rephrasing the question in this way, "What are the practical consequences of evacuating the agency and power to action (economic, legal, political, social, technical, artistic) which has congealed around the constructed 'self'?"

We dug into Foucault's essay on "technologies of self" and posed Garrett's question to the Classical Greek subject, the subject of the Hellenistic and Imperial period, the Medieval Christian subject, and the Modern Liberal subject. We found that the Classical Greek subject used the notion of the "self" to educate and prepare the youth for political life, for gathering and acting in the Agora. We found that the subject of the Hellenistic and Imperial period found that the "self" was not just useful for preparing and educating the youth but useful throughout the course of one's life as one had to properly relate oneself to one's office or station in order to properly carry out one's duties in the context of the megamachine of empire. For the Classical Greek subject and the Hellenistic and Imperial subject, the "self" was useful to make sure that one was ready to do the right thing at the right time, in the context of the polis for the Classical Greek subject and in the context of the

imperial megamachine for the Hellenistic/Imperial subject. For the Medieval Christian subject, by contrast, the "self" was useful for getting one to do things *for the right reasons*. Indeed, for the Medieval Christian, whether one did the right thing at the right time was less important than whether one did what one did for the right reasons, whatever one did and whenever one did it. In other words, the Medieval Christian subject used the notion of the self to characterize *intentions* as sinful or not in relation to God's commandments.

What about the Modern Liberal subject? For the Medieval Christian subject, there was only *one* system of good reason that ruled in both private and public life, there was God's system of good reason. The Modern Liberal subject, by contrast, has to weigh his own private/personal reasons which are good reasons against public/impersonal reasons which are also good reasons. The notion of the "self" is used by the Modern Liberal subject to create the difference between the private interest and the public interest and to pose the question, "When am I justified in acting *selfishly*, in putting my private interests above the public interest? When is it imperative that I act *selflessly* and put the public interest above my private interests?" We talked about the public and private distinction in a number of ways, stressing the problem of privacy rights and stressing the Modern Liberal subject's fear of being outed, of having information about their private lives made public. We also noted that our group's framing text, which uses the term "selfish", tacitly assumes the Modern Liberal subject's use of the "self" to differentiate public and private interests.

We then discussed the prevalence of the mirror test in the scientific literature on self-awareness in animals, and commented that the mirror test proved nothing about self-awareness generally: the mirror test is only a test of whether or not an animal can be trained to use a mirror for cybernetic self-reflection. We talked briefly about the cybernetic approach to governing the Modern Liberal subject, which takes the difference between the private interest and public interest for granted and works to either (i) regulate private interests to further the public interest [social democratic capitalism] or, vice versa, (ii) to regulate the public interest so as to further private interests [liberal capitalism] or, alternatively, (iii) to regulate *these* private interests in order to further *those* private interests [neoliberal capitalism].

Returning to the mirror test as a *cybernetic technology* of self: the mirror test only asks whether or not the mirror image *informs* the animal that it has been marked by the scientist-cybernetician. According to psychoanalysis, when one "advances" beyond the mirror stage, by either using language or by embellishing oneself "*the way [one] do[es] with makeup, earrings, toupees, and the like*", one "advances" beyond informing (on) oneself and becomes concerned with *evoking responses from others*. *Cybernetic technologies* of self are technologies that get us to *inform (on) ourselves*. *Psychoanalytic technologies* of self, by contrast, get us to *evoke responses from others*. These two types of technologies of self, the cybernetic and the psychoanalytic, are not opposed. Indeed, in the next session, we shall consider how the field of public relations gets people to inform (on) themselves is to ask them to evoke responses from others: psychoanalytic technologies of self can *supplement* cybernetic technologies of self. Indeed, this is what social media is all about: Facebook is a platform that gets us to inform (on) ourselves by enabling us to evoke responses from others.

## SESSION 3:

### *Dreams and nightmares of first-order cybernetic self-reflection.*

04.22.2020

#### Participants:

Garrett Laroy Johnson, Jonathan Agins, Muindi Fanuel Muindi, and Tim Wells

#### Readings:

- ❑ [Episode 1](#) & [Episode 2](#) of The Century of the Self by Adam Curtis
- ❑ Introduction and Conclusion of [The Authoritarian Personality](#) by Theodor W. Adorno et. al.
- ❑ ["Walden Two Revisited"](#) by B.F. Skinner
- ❑ ["As We May Think"](#) by Vannevar Bush

We began by asking the following question: is the Modern "self", which departs from the Christian "self", a return to the Epicurean "self"? The Moderns like the Epicureans affirm an "atomic materialism" and it follows that the Moderns like the Epicureans would believe that, as Jon Agins put it, "all values are based on feelings of pleasure and pain rather than any transcendent ideals or internal 'entelechies'". Ay, but this return to Epicureanism is also a departure from Epicureanism. Indeed, we discussed six ways in which the Modern departs from the Epicurean.

1. **Pleasure vs. Self-Preservation:** While the Epicurean rationality demands technologies that mollify the "irrational" fear of death and subordinated it to pleasure-sustenance, modern rationality is based on the primacy of "self-preservation," and therefore subordinates pleasure-sustenance to longevity (no matter how painful).
2. **Quality of Pleasures vs. Quantity of Pleasures:** While Epicurean "pleasure" emphasizes the reduction of desires that produce pain—leaving room for only a few moderate positive pleasures—the modern conception of "happiness" is hedonistic and acquisitive. Longevity is a virtue because a long life that allows for greater quantity of pleasures, no matter the quality, trumps a short life that allows for but a few pleasures, even if these few are of high quality.
3. **Eternity vs. History:** The Epicurean "self" exists against the "boring" eternal backdrop of atoms and the void, but the modern "self" exists against the "dramatic" historical backdrop of progress and significant change. Here, again, longevity becomes a virtue as greater longevity allows one greater participation in history and progress.
4. **Atheism vs. Secularism:** While the pursuit of Epicurean pleasure relies on the certain denial of gods and the afterlife that arises from its materialist worldview, the modern pursuit of pleasure is often accompanied by compartmentalized religious beliefs or spiritual uncertainty regarding the god(s) and the afterlife. Here, once more, longevity becomes a virtue because uncertainty regarding the afterlife makes death more frightening and all the more worth postponing.
5. **Retreating to Garden vs. Returning to the Market:** While the Epicurean self pursues a garden that is secluded from public life, the modern self is only supposed to "indulge" in such private retreats in order to prepare for a return to public life, as preparation for bringing a better self to the market.
6. **Self-Tranquilizing vs. Selfishness/Selflessness:** A part of the modern discourse of the self is the discourse of "selfishness/selflessness", a discourse that asks one to take pains to limit one's own private pursuit of happiness so that others' may also pursue their own happiness. The modern keeps a ledger and is always trying to balance debits (one's taking pleasure in and for oneself) and credits (taking pains oneself so as to let others take pleasure in and for themselves). The moderns once again

make a virtue of longevity here as the longer one lives the more time one gets to defer earning credits, paying off debts, and balancing one's ledger. The discourse of "selfishness/selflessness" is absent from the Epicurean ethics of pursuing tranquility.

We lingered on the selfishness/selflessness problem for a while, asking the question: what does it mean to limit one's own private pursuit of happiness so that others' may also pursue their own happiness. Is the so-called "public good" anything more than the statistical distribution of so many private goods? Or is there a "public good" that is something other than and greater than the statistical distribution of private goods? The former position, that there are only "little others", that there is only the statistical distribution of private goods, was Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal position: "[T]here's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." The later position, that there is a "Big Other", that there is "public good" that is something other than and greater than the statistical distribution of private goods, is the social democratic position that Adam Curtis seems to maintain in *The Century of the Self*. These opposed positions, the neo-liberal and the social democratic position, differ from one another, yes, but they both defer to the modern self: self-preserving, acquisitive, historical, agnostic, market oriented, and preoccupied with the distinction between selfishness and selflessness. The social democrat wants to govern the modern self for the sake of a "Big Other", a greater "public good" ; the neo-liberal doesn't take the "Big Other" seriously, doesn't believe in any greater "public good" beyond that of governing the modern self so as to reduce conflicts amongst so many little others, conflicts amongst individual men, women, and families; but both the social democrat and the neoliberal would conserve the modern self in order to govern the modern self, neither would engender a new and different kind of self nor would they do away with the self altogether.

We read the *Authoritarian Personality* and found Adorno et al arguing that the self is a construct evolving "under the impact of the social environment and can never be isolated from the social totality within which it occurs." Adorno, in the *Authoritarian Personality*, argues for "[Programs for democratic action that] should not be limited to devices for manipulating people in such a way that they will behave more democratically, but [...] should be devoted to increasing the kind of self-awareness and self-determination that makes any kind of manipulation impossible." In other words, Adorno wants us to become aware of how our "selves" have been constructed/oriented and to determine to reconstruct/reorient our "selves" so as to better pursue what he calls the "truest ideology". This "truest ideology" is, of course, a "Big Other", a greater public good of some kind. Although it isn't taken for granted theoretically, we still find *The Authoritarian Personality* practically assuming the modern self. Ethically, in practice, Adorno holds that there is a private self that emerges under certain social conditions, that takes pleasure in and for itself at the expense of society and the public good, and who must take pains to pay off its debt to the society and do the public good by upending the conditions that lead to its unfortunate emergence.

Ok, ok, ok... Let's say that we DO NOT want to take the modern self and its debts to others, Big or little, for granted, neither in theory nor in practice. Let's say that we would rather engender a new and different sort of self. Who are we to turn to? We looked to ethologists, primate ethologists in particular; we talked about Deleuze & Guattari's schizoanalysis; we spoke of Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities*. Ay, and rough and ready notions of an "eco/etho/ethico-aesthetic" self were discussed during our conversations. What would be the technologies of this "eco/etho/ethico-aesthetic" self? How might the modern self co-opt and recuperate these "eco/etho/ethico-aesthetic" technologies to perpetuate its own existence? How might these "eco/etho/ethico-aesthetic" technologies explode the modern self?



## SESSION 4:

### *Dreams and nightmares of second-order cybernetic self-reflection.*

04.29.2020

#### Participants:

Brian Holmes, Jonathan Agins, Muindi Fanuel Muindi, Tim Wells, Cáit NiSiomón

#### Readings:

- ❑ [Episode 3](#) & [Episode 4](#) of *The Century of the Self* by Adam Curtis
- ❑ [The Flexible Personality](#) by Brian Holmes
- ❑ Introduction to [Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control](#) by Mack Hagood

**Where are we now?** This was the question that we asked ourselves during our last session. We gazed into our black mirrors, we winked and nodded knowingly at the surveillance capitalists behind the glass, we scrutinized the specular reflections of our **WEIRD** faces, and we saw in our reflections the *lean and hungry* looks of '[precarious intellectuals](#)' working 'to promote them**selves**' in 'intellectual fields' in order to perpetuate 'the economy of enrichment'. **We think too much. Does that make us dangerous?**

We tried to sketch out for ourselves a history of co-optation, attending most carefully to the play of liberation and recuperation. We asked two questions:

1. To what extent has/can neoliberal discourses appropriate/recuperate the rhetoric of "self-expression" and the "aesthetic experience" to manipulate behaviors and perpetuate prevailing forms of social organization?
2. To what extent do criticisms of the neoliberal appropriation/recuperation of "self-expression" and "aesthetic experiences" rely on crypto-rationalist notions of "material self-interest" that presuppose the fundamental value of "self-preservation" and a rational subject who pursues it?

Brian Holmes, author of the [Flexible Personality](#), joined us and reflected on the text 20 years on. We were struck by the fact that the Flexible Personality has, more or less, become more and more influential in the age of Instagram Influencers, YouTube stars, and artists pushing their personal brands. But we were ambivalent towards this development. We contrasted (i) adaptation to self-destructive capitalism in order to perpetuate it, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, (ii) creative adaptation to fluctuating ecological conditions in order to engage with them. The question, as Brian put it, is this, "How do you *conduct* the process of becoming that constitutes a subjectivization?" This question "dynamizes" the self as a process of engagement with the outside/other rather than assuming the self as a static integral unity and, what's more, this question embraces both the liberating and limiting possibilities of this process: the self is either liberated or limited *for the sake of something other than itself*, as opposed to being liberated or limited in and for itself.

We discussed several motives for "subjectivizing" so as to resist the self-destructive tendencies of capitalism: the aesthetic motive (the "interest" and excitement that one experiences in and through resisting), the ethical motive (one's "duty" or "responsibility" to resist), and the motive of self-preservation (the SELF-preservation of our individual being, our species-being, our Gaian being).



We then discussed the problem of autonomy [from *autos* "self" + *nomos* "custom, law"] and concluded that autonomy was not a matter of opposing a private nomos and a public nomos. We agreed that all great transvaluations begin with a "creator" of new values or a small group of creators. The question is not how many people share one's values, nor whether one's values are private values or public values, but rather whether and to what degree one's valuations can affect others' valuations.

Finally, we discussed three different ways of referring to one's self.

1. The *organismic* or *in-dividualistic* reference to one's self-possession, to one's organs as one's possessions: "I feel it in **my gut**"; "I saw it with **my own eyes**"; "You broke **my heart**"; "**My nose** tells me something is off."
2. The *architectural* or *dividualistic* reference to one's capacity to keep things in(side) or out(side) of oneself, "My body is a temple"; "I am a **guarded** person", "I've kept these feelings **locked up inside** me for so long", "You'll be **shut out** of my life"; "I'll **keep** you in confidence."
3. The *environmental* or *ex-dividualistic* reference to oneself as a kind of landscape, "You are **growing** on me."

We discussed how these three ways of referring to one's self can easily transform into one another. That being said, the architectural way of referring to oneself, with its in(put)s and out(put)s, seemed more fundamental to the modern self than the organismic and the environmental. The notion of the ethical compass, which discovers the direction of the flux passing through a moral force-field at a given spatiotemporal location, was discussed as an interesting environmental way of referring to oneself that was difficult for the modern self to appropriate/recuperate.

Ay, and having ditched our black mirrors and discovered our ethical compasses, it seemed to us as if we had managed to answer the question, "Where are we now?" And over the two few weeks, we hope to use our compasses to ask and answer the following question for ourselves, "**Where do we go from here?**"

## SESSION 5:

### *Dreams and nightmares of the end(s) of cybernetics, of self-annihilation.*

05.06.2020

#### Participants:

Jonathan Agins, Jonathan Bratt, Garrett Laroy Johnson, Muindi Fanuel Muindi, Thierry Bardini, Tim Wells, Cáit NiSiomón, David Sherman

#### Readings:

- ❑ ["The Electronic Revolution"](#) by William Burroughs
- ❑ "Fanged Noumenon" and "Fluent Bodies" from [The Thirst for Annihilation](#) by Nick Land
- ❑ Introduction and Conclusion to [How to Do Nothing](#) by Jenny Odell

We began by discussing the relationship between William S. Burroughs's *Electronic Revolution* and Alfred Korzybski's general semantics "self-improvement" program. Korzybski is famous for having coined the phrase, "The map is not the territory." This phrase contains the fundamental intuition at the heart of general semantics: we do *ourselves* harm by *identifying* the map with the territory that it represents, by *identifying* the word with the world that it represents, by *identifying* the "I" as "subject of the statement" with the flesh that enunciates the "I" statement. Burroughs takes Korzybski's insight as a point of departure and argues that we *do not* do *ourselves* harm through such identifications but, rather, that these identifications, which constitute the self, are the effects of a *virus* that *does harm to the flesh* and--*here follows the radical insight*--what this virus effects in the flesh is the virus itself, the virus-become-flesh. In other words, self-identification (the identification of the "I" as "subject of the statement" with the flesh that enunciates the "I" statement) is the self-as-virus effecting itself, giving itself flesh.

We talked about how Burroughs's text is all about fighting this viral infection: he is all about building immunity to the virulent self. Burroughs doesn't aim to build immunity through vaccination but rather through a radical sort of *exposure therapy*. Burroughs wants to teach everyone (i) how to manufacture their own virulent strain of the self-virus and (ii) how to use informal and unregulated channels to disseminate their viral selves. Burroughs believes that self-viruses, and other word-viruses, have power over the flesh because *both* the ability to create such viruses *and* the channels of viral transmission have been consolidated by authority so as to spread such viruses at controlled rates that maximize and weaponize their virulence and lethality. Burroughs's *Electronic Revolution* would open the floodgates and thereby minimize the virulence and lethality of the self-virus.

Hasn't Burroughs *Electronic Revolution* taken place? Doesn't a daily profusion of viral social media personalities issue forth from doctored, filtered, and spliced audiovisual recordings in the very manner that Burroughs prescribed? Burroughs imagined that the flesh would become immune to the self-virus through this radical exposure, but it seems to us that the flesh has become all the more susceptible to self-viruses and that self-viruses have become all the more lethal (an awful example comes to mind: the alt-right lone gunmen live streaming their rampages for eventual remix, replay, rewatching on 8chan). What's more, surveillance capitalism has, of course, found ways to capitalize on the informal and unregulated dissemination of self-viruses through social media channels.

We talked about how Jenny Odell would counter Burroughs *Electronic Revolution*. *How to Do Nothing* seeks to thwart surveillance capitalism by getting us to *do nothing* with ourselves, getting us to resist spreading ourselves through social media. Burroughs prescribed a radical exposure therapy so as to drive up the curve

of infections and rapidly build-up immunity; Odell prescribes a sort of quarantine: do nothing, reduce your social media interactions in order to limit the spread of the virulent self--flatten the curve! We talked about how Odell's book suggests neither a vaccine nor a therapy for the virulent self, nor does it suggest any means by which we might discover a vaccine or therapy. The book only suggests ways to slow things down so that we might have time to discover a vaccine or therapy before the self-virus pandemic causes the flesh to wither and become dust.

We noted that Odell draws a great deal of inspiration from ancient technologies of self-care: Daoism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, Stoicism etc. We also noted that these ancient technologies were, during their heyday, entangled with rigorous commitments to certain metaphysical valuations. Ay, and we wondered to ourselves whether rigorous metaphysical valuations combined with technologies of self-care are the only therapies against the virulence of the self. In particular, we discussed the merits of Epicurean's metaphysical valuation of *ataraxia*. Could we re-value the Epicurean's metaphysical valuation in order to create new therapeutic technologies of self-care? There was disagreement to be had on this question. Why re-value the anesthetic condition of *ataraxia* in order to treat the virulent self when one might re-value, for instance, the Dionysian aesthetic condition of ecstasy? We shall have to revisit this question again...

In any case, we were ambivalent about the virulent self: is it necessarily dis-abling? Might it not be enabling? Ay, and isn't the self-as-virus a historical construct, the artifact of the subjectivizing technologies of late-capitalism that we discussed when we read the flexible personality?

Lastly, we discussed Nick Land's text on Bataille a little, but not much. We noted that, as part of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (C cru), Land was an early adopter of Burroughs's radical exposure therapy. We noted that Land was obsessed with Bataille's notion of destructive expenditure, the exhaustion of excess through wallowing in death and decay, but that Land had little to say on Bataille's notion of luxurious expenditure, the exuberant expenditure of excess through joyous carnivals, feasts, and games that *redeem* death and decay. What's more, we noted that it is no wonder that Land, who was obsessed with Bataille's notion of transgression, would swing to the right, given that it is the right that has become obsessed with the transgression of political correctness, of the policing of language, of liberal common decencies. Ay, but, we all seemed to find Land's transgressivity distasteful, reactive, and easily co-optable. In light of all the above, is it any wonder that Land has managed to make himself "go viral" on the intellectual dark web?

## SESSION 6:

### *Dreams and nightmares of biological and ecological self-reflection*

05.13.2020

#### Participants:

Jonathan Agins, Jonathan Bratt, Garrett Laroy Johnson, Muindi Fanuel Muindi, Thierry Bardini, Cáit NiSiomon, Phillip Thurtle

#### Readings:

- ❑ ["ALIENATED LIFE: Towards a Goth Theory of Biology"](#) by Phillip Thurtle
- ❑ ["Viral Life, at Last"](#) by Thierry Bardini
- ❑ Chapter 6-7 of [The Human Swarm](#) by Mark W. Moffett
- ❑ ["Swarm intelligence in fish? The difficulty in demonstrating distributed and self-organised collective intelligence in \(some\) animal groups"](#) by Christos C. Ioannou

Thierry Bardini and Phillip Thurtle joined us this week as we searched for *reflections* of our "selves" in biological and ecological processes.

We searched for reflections of our "selves", yes, but we did not find them: *biological and ecological processes quite simply do not reflect our "selves"*. If one reaches in and stirs biological and ecological processes about, one might find the part of one's self that *implements* the stirring *refracted* in and through biological and ecological processes: just like one might find one's finger refracted in a cup of water when one uses one's finger to stir the water in the cup about. *But a refraction is not a reflection*. The phrase "biological and ecological self-reflection" is a misnomer. Indeed, this session should have been titled "Dreams and nightmares of biological and ecological *self-refraction*."

Ok, so, if all that we ever regard of our "selves" in biological and ecological processes are *refractions* of those parts of us that serve as *implements* for influencing these processes, then it follows that ***to regard our "selves" in and through biological and ecological processes is to regard implementations of our "selves"***. This was *THE* recurring theme throughout this week's session. Indeed, perhaps we should no longer talk about self-care but, instead, talk about *self-implementation*, about ways of *asserting* a "self" in and through influencing biological and ecological processes. Ay, but we mustn't over-privilege self-implementation: there are many, many ways of influencing biological and ecological processes that don't involve asserting a "self" but that, instead, involve asserting something above, below, or beyond a "self". Indeed, Phillip could not stress this point enough: so many of the most remarkable ways in which medical professionals and biologists influence biological processes *are not* forms of self-implementation, *are not* ways of asserting a "self". Indeed, we find that psychologists, social scientists, entrepreneurs, and politicians (i.e., those who tend to be more "self" interested and less interested in biological and ecological processes apart from the "self") are those who tend to reduce biology to self-implementation. That being said, Thierry's text astutely points out that no biologist is a pure biologist. Biologists psychologize, socialize, enterprise, and politick and, in so doing, biologists often become "self" interested and have often themselves reduced biology to self-implementation, even though they should know better.

We returned to the theme of last week's session, the "self-as-virus", and we discussed two kinds of viral self-implementation: (i) virulent (or lytic) self-implementation and (ii) temperate (or lysogenic) self-implementation. Virulent self-implementation dissipates the biological and ecological processes that it influences in order to assert a self. Temperate self-implementation aggregates the biological and ecological

processes that it influences in order to assert a self. Just as virulence and temperance in viruses are not necessarily opposed to one another, virulent and temperate self-implementation are not necessarily opposed to one another. Virulent and temperate self-implementation play off one another, become one another. This new distinction between the virulent and the temperate called into question the title of this very reading group: to speak of the virulent(ly) self(ish) is to over-privilege virulent self-implementation. Aren't we more interested in the play of the tendency towards virulence and the tendency towards temperance, the *drama* that brings the two tendencies together, the drama that, by fortuitous turns, attracts and repels the two to one another?

Throughout the session, we were inspired by Phillip text, and spoke of biological organisms as "congregations of complex processes choreographed across incongruent spaces, materials, and durations". When we approached the Moffett text, *The Human Swarm*, we wondered whether Moffett should've written about *social organizations* in the same manner in which we were speaking about *biological organisms*. Mightn't the notion of a "pool of teeming differences" account for the liveliness and robustness of a social organization far better than a notion of a "swarm with a common identity"? Then again, however, just as the virulent and the temperate are not necessarily opposed to one another, the "pool of teeming differences" and the "swarm with a common identity" are not necessarily opposed to one another. Again, we were more interested in the play of the tendency towards "pooling teeming differences" and the tendency towards "swarming with a common identity", the *drama* that brings the two tendencies together, the drama that, by fortuitous turns, attracts and repels the two to one another.

## **SESSION 7:**

### ***Dreams and nightmares of self-reflexivity.***

05.20.2020

#### **Participants:**

*Jonathan Agins, Muindi Fanuel Muindi, Thierry Bardini, Tim Wells*

#### **Readings:**

- "The Virulen(ly) Self(ish)": session summaries and notes from our shared [google doc](#).

Last week, we ditched the narcissistic term "self-reflection" and adopted the more apprehensive term "self-implementation". We began to consider (i) how it was that we might implement parts of our "selves" in order to influence different processes and (ii) how it was that these implemented parts of our "selves" were refracted by the processes that influenced. Again, take as an example how one might find one's finger refracted in a cup of water when one uses one's finger as an implement to stir the water in the cup about.

This week we discussed the fact that self-implementation, although not self-reflective, is always implicitly self-reflexive.

Indeed, the main topic of conversation this week was whether it was an ethical imperative that we go from being implicitly self-reflexive to being explicitly self-reflexive: that we not just implement our "selves" but that we become conscious of the act and the fact of implementing our "selves". For those of us who would eschew self-implementation (which was NOT all of us present at this session), the imperative to become explicitly self-reflexive might appear to be a false ethical imperative: becoming explicitly self-reflexive might seem to further belabor self-implementation. Why further belabor self-implementation when we aim to eschew self-implementation altogether? Well, because if we do not first become explicitly self-reflexive, we might, unbeknownst to ourselves, wind up furthering self-implementation in rather perverse ways. Paradoxically, it was argued that explicit self-reflexivity was the pre-condition for eschewing self-implementation. As it was argued but the matter wasn't settled, arguments were made that this paradox was no more than a further belaboring.

The paradoxical argument above was elaborated upon when the three grammatical voices described by Lacanian psychoanalysis were introduced. Lacanian psychoanalysis tells us that accounting for dreams in the active and reflexive voices can never get us to the "actual subjects" of our dreams. To get to the "actual subjects" of our dreams when we account for them in the passive voice.

If, for instance, I have a dream in which I am eaten by a pack of wolves, I will not get to the "actual subject" of my dream by using the active voice and accounting for my dream as follows, "A pack of wolves devoured me in my dream." The active voice disavows the dream's internal significance insofar as the dreamer gives up responsibility for what has happened to them in their dream: the dream happens upon the dreamer in the active account of the dream.

Nor will I get to the "actual subject" of my dream by recognizing that the wolf pack is nothing more or other than a projection of myself and, thusly, accounting for my dream in the reflexive voice, "I devoured myself in my dream." The self-reflexive voice disavows the dream's external significance insofar as the dreamer takes responsibility for everything that happens to them in their dream: the dreamer happens upon themselves in the reflexive account of the dream.

If I am to get to the "actual subject" of my dream, I must account for my dream in the Lacanian (per)version of the passive voice: "I made myself be devoured by a pack of wolves in my dream." The Lacanian (per)version of the passive voice traverses both the internal significance and external significance of the dream: the dreamer shares responsibility for what happens to them in the dream with others. The dreamer makes themselves be happened upon by the dream in the Lacanian (per)version passive account.

Thinking through the example that dominated our conversation last week, the example of self-implementation achieved by influencing biological and ecological processes, the Lacanian would say that the "actual subject" of this example is to be found not in the reflexive voicing "to implement oneself" but in the Lacanian (per)version passive voicing: "to make oneself be implemented by a biological and ecological process".

Some of us wanted to take up Lacan here and to argue that the passive voice exceeds, succeeds, and precedes the reflexive voice. Ay, but some of us argued for reflexivity has priority over and against passivity and found the Lacanian grammatical argument lacking. Ay, but some of us found both the reflexive and the passive voices belaboring of self-implementation.

And here things came to an end...