

Chaos, Desire, and the Neoliberal Self:
A Socio-Theoretical Critique of Contemporary Idolization

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Sociology and Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Sociology) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2023

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Entitled: Chaos, Desire, and the Neoliberal Self:
A Socio-Theoretical Critique of Contemporary Idolization

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Sociology)

Complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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ABSTRACT

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With an ever-increasing engagement with the world through social media technologies, our relationship with others takes on novel directions. This thesis will approach this unusual landscape by considering both its emergence and impetus, through the dynamics of the Self. To do so, however, requires a re-evaluation of the concept of self and its critical relationship to chaos, and thereby, desire. Such will be done with the unlikely conjunction of two thinkers: George Herbert Mead and Gilles Deleuze. Despite their numerous differences, their contrasting theoretical stances will rejuvenate an image of self that is no longer a philosophic abstraction simply observing the world, but one unreservedly contiguous to nature's unfolding, thus riddled with unforeseen possibilities. It will be shown that the scope of 'our' desire can only be captured conceptually when such a force is drawn into the core of the self, expanding the creative potentiality that lies within every individual. Such will allow us to grasp the important role celebrity figures play not only in the progression of society, but furthermore in the mediation of our very desires to a point of indolence – defining the very state of society we see today.

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Introduction:

“For life is tendency, and the essence of a tendency is to develop in the form of a sheaf, creating, by its very growth, divergent directions among which its impetus is divided.”

*Henri Bergson (1941)
Creative Evolution, p.110*

In an epoch of hyper-communication and immediate contact with the global state of affairs through mass media, it is hardly surprising that our experience of the world appears extremely chaotic. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the outbreak of a global pandemic and the spread of right-wing populism, the very irrationality of our existence is perpetually placed at the fore of our day-to-day lives. Indeed, there is something deeply perplexing about our contemporary global situation, especially when we consider how the advancements of science and technology are typically seen as the ultimate response to such chaos. Should not the mass accumulation of data – amounting to an acute recording of history – help mitigate the perpetuation of socio-political systems that seem only to repeat the failures of the past? It is precisely this mindset that appears to hold common sense. Why should it not? If the sciences are able to confront the complexities of the human organism resulting in an increase of our life expectancy, why should they not be able to apply the same method to the perpetuation of society?

In *What is Philosophy?*¹ Deleuze and Guattari broadly characterize this struggle, precisely against the *chaos* of reality. We are confronted by chaos not simply in our social worlds, but most infuriatingly in our very thoughts, as

“Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness

¹ Deleuze & Guattari (1994) *What is Philosophy*.

or precipitated into others that we no longer master [...] That is why we want to hang on to fixed opinions so much”.²

Thus, we mitigate chaos with the unchanging; *doxa* or *opinion*. We find ourselves consumed by the lives of individual we have never met, yet somehow absolved by their banal rhetoric. This is most clearly the case in political polemics today, but it goes much further in contemporary society with the increased investment into cellphones and other social media devices.

The question is, have we not just replaced one struggle for another? Is not a thought that remains within opinion *thoughtless*? It is at this point that we return to our contemporary social world, and see that our misfortunes are not derived from chaos as such, but from the clash of opinion that ensues.³ It must be understood that Deleuze and Guattari are not taking a polemic stance on either chaos nor opinion; thought cannot emerge without the grounding order of opinion, but neither can thought *think* (in terms of thinking otherwise) without the *ungrounding* chaos it emerges from. As we will come to see, chaos is not simply an infinite void, but a vital force that lingers in the gaps of reality. Jacques Monod equally characterizes the emergence of life in the same manner: through the interweaving of both chance *and* necessity.⁴

The relevance of this, however, is in how we can manage to reconcile the issues threatening the very existence of life on earth. While this thesis will limit itself to the socio-political sphere, a very particular area indeed, the reader should be reminded that this reorientation of thought remains immanent to the generalized global problems, all the way to our most personal struggles. Our focus here, will remain with the latter, for if we attempt to jump straight to the big picture, we instantly deprive ourselves of a ground to stand on, which we so

² Ibid, p.201

³ “the struggle with chaos is only the instrument of a more profound struggle against opinion, for the misfortune of people comes from opinion.” p.206

⁴ Monod (1971) *Chance and Necessity*.

desperately need. Nevertheless, the global evolution and changes our planet undergoes should always be kept in mind, insofar as changes at the micro level tend to be emphasized even greater at the macro level.

The question, then, is what mediates our raw personal experiences in its oscillation between chaotic uncertainty and fixed opinions? It will be argued throughout this thesis that this is the domain or ‘work’ of the *Self*. To do so, we must reconceive the self in light of this antagonism. The concept of self will occupy a prominent position not simply because of its mediative role, but more importantly in its pragmatic utility in analyzing our contemporary state of affairs. This centrality of the self will become clearer with an outline of the work to come.

Layout of the work:

The first chapter will take us to the heart of the problem, albeit in a rather abstract manner. Here, we will drive headfirst into the metaphysical grounds that require our attention, which is precisely the problem of chaos. Is chaos just a nonsense concept flagrantly used in obscure philosophies, or does it have practical uses? The relevance of taking on such a question is to provide a critical methodological basis which can ground the creative theoretical endeavour that follows. The central critique of identity which lies at the heart of all post-structuralist thinking, such as that of Serres and Deleuze, seems to us as crucial not only for unearthing basic social binaries associated with our understanding of ourselves and others, but more importantly for substantiating a pragmatic concept of self. Such a mode of thought hinges on changing the way we think about time to merge it with the openness of chaos. Generalizing chaos beyond its normative sense of pure disorder and thereby *destructive*, it will be seen as a vital force

fundamental to the constitution of the very reality we experience. Chaos will then be seen to participate in the animation of mysterious forces such as desire, which will be demonstrated to be critical to the dynamics of the self. As we will come to see in greater detail in the second chapter, for the concept of self to become pragmatic – that is, conceptually useful for situating ourselves in the world – it requires a deep mediation on the interplay of subversive forces typically ignored.

Chapter two will extend these thoughts on chaos and desire into a reimagined field of the Self. Here, the unlikely coupling of George Herbert Mead and Gilles Deleuze will prove to be decisive. The precariousness of such a conjunction will quickly dissipate once it is seen that their differences concede to an incredible symmetry in thought on *time*. While most presentations of Mead seem to exclude his thoughts on time, it will be demonstrated just how central works such as *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932) are to the concept of self. Being one of his original works, it warrants a reconsideration – one that can transform his notion of self and bring it in line with thinkers such as Deleuze. This will be done in close connection to an analysis of Deleuze's understanding of an unconscious field of desire, not strictly as a critique of Mead, but instead to bolster the metaphysical basis of self in its relation to time. Neither Deleuze nor Mead will be left unchanged after such a conjunction, yet the sparks that will emerge from their encounter will prove to be fruitful for future thought engaging with either one of them. Here, we will see the self as the field in-between chaos and consistency – or as the sociality of desire and the other.

Lastly, we will utilize the previous two chapter and their theoretical discussion in a practical situation to express more clearly the pragmatics of the self in the way we engage with the contemporary social world. While no particular celebrity idol will be isolated for such an investigation, the practicality of such a general standpoint will prove to be useful in our ethical

considerations. It is here that we will return to the original concern seen in the introduction, regarding the oscillation between chaos and fixed opinions in the public sphere. There are various examples that could be used in such a situation, however one that seems most pressing to our current day that has already been hinted at, is our engagement with celebrity figures. Such a figure, it will be demonstrated, marks a critical vector in the development of self today, as we are able to engage instantaneously with the unfolding of their lives through various mediums. The consequences of such perennial involvement in the lives of celebrities of different kinds will be considered with regard to our desire investments: an area of our life that is assuredly in need of more attention both academically and self-reflexively.

Method and Motive of Work:

The goal of this thesis is threefold. The first is methodological and comes from a deeply rooted concern of Serres that will be explored in great detail in the first chapter. This is the problem of the ossification of thought, particularly when it comes to the sciences and the establishment of opinion.⁵ It seems to me that our current global state of affairs is marked by the tendency towards increasingly *intense* daily experiences, to the point that we as individual can hardly keep up. Rather than deliberating on the events of our time, we submit to established responses that provide us with ease of mind. This is by no means a new idea, but it takes on a radical urgency when we consider the fact of ecological crisis that threatens the survival of life on earth *if we do not act*. The flipside to our daily bombardment of events is that it overwhelms us *to the point of inaction*, something we can truly not afford. Thus, our first goal will be to

⁵ Serres (1995) *Genesis*, p.103

approach this problem and explore how we can respond to it. The problem of thoughtlessness will confront us at every turn, especially in our investigation of celebrity figures, insofar as they play the paradoxical role of being the dominant source for both being entrenched *and* circumventing the enclosure of opinion.

The second goal, very much related to the first, is to explore a domain of social interaction that has been neglected despite its growing prominence in our social activities. This, of course, is our relationship with celebrity figures or idols. While there is a rich history of philosophy exploring the dynamics between the ruler and ruled, from Hegel's master – slave dialectic to Weber's writing on types of authority, none of them are able to anticipate our current daily interaction with a figure in such diverse domains.⁶ It is within the third chapter of this thesis that we will explore the contemporary workings of this relationship, while bringing ethical considerations to our involvement in them. This point will further challenge us to consider the role of social theory and the impact it can have on the functioning of the socio-political sphere. Together, these two themes aim at bringing to light a new perspective on our daily experiences while providing strategies for overcoming the many difficulties we are all facing.

What is crucial, however, and ultimately subsumes these two goals, is gaining a further understanding of the field in which these experiences play out. This is the milieu of the self, which marks the primary theoretical endeavour of this work, and potentially its most significant contribution to social theory. When we speak of intense overwhelming experiences – from ecstatic joy to harsh sadness's – but equally the inverse, seemingly uneventful experiences where we are just going about our day, we are unequivocally within the domain of self. To affect our relationship with this limited sphere we might call our own, through thought that supersedes

⁶ Hegel (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*. & Weber (2019) *Economy and Society*.

paraphrased opinions, is the key battle that underlies every idea in this work. It is a battle not to be won, but to be enjoyed – one that we can profit from if we allow ourselves to see the world just a little differently from what we are used to.

We began with a chaotic image of the world; an image that is undeniable yet appears so distant to the living struggles we face in our relative horizon of experience. However, we cannot simply ignore this generalized chaos that envelops us in our very thoughts. For this reason, our investigation will begin with what seems most abstract – the chaos of reality – to then be brought down to concrete terms. It appears to me that chaos, nonsense, or the disquietude of nature has not been sufficiently conceptualized within the field of sociology. In the domain of philosophy, however, the works of Michel Serres along with Deleuze and Guattari have provided extremely insightful works on how we can grasp such complexities.

Thus, we will begin the first segment by looking at how Serres and Deleuze conceives of chaos in terms of thinking pure multiplicities, along with its relation to Time and the Event. Once we have covered the abstract conceptual grounds, we will then attempt to synthesize such an understanding with our approach to social theory. This will unfold in the following chapters through the concept of self and other.

Chapter 1: Chaos, Time, and Multiplicities

In his book ‘Genesis’, Michel Serres calls for the necessity of the social science, such as Sociology, to think chaos.⁷ Two questions immediately follow from this: firstly, why must these fields think chaos, and secondly, how? It is this originary call that inspires the grounds of this first chapter. While it is no doubt quite ambiguous right now, the goal of this segment will be to provide clarity to the concept of chaos, while simultaneously demonstrating its utility to social theory.

Chaos as such, can truthfully only be seen as a pure abstraction.⁸ While the goal of this segment will be to characterize and appropriately conceptualize chaos, we cannot simply begin with it as an obvious ‘given’. It is true, Serres sees himself as a Rationalist⁹, however it would be a mistake to take this in the same sense as Descartes or Leibniz. We must see Serres and likewise Deleuze in the terms of Whitehead’s Empiricism:

“the abstract does not explain, but must itself be explained; and the aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is produced (creativity).”¹⁰

This quote has profound consequences for how we approach the concept of chaos, but also the philosophy of the late 20th century which orients this entire chapter. What it indicates to us, firstly, is that we cannot be satisfied with invoking an emanatory beginning as the basis for our explanation of state of affairs. More importantly, however, is the purpose of such an

⁷ Serres (1995) p.103

⁸ Deleuze (1993) *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, p.76

⁹ Serres & Latour (1995) *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, p.129

¹⁰ Deleuze & Parnet (2002) *Dialogue II*, (vi)

investigation, which is grounded precisely in the production of *novelty*. It is in the production of the new, which is indissociable from the temporality of *events* participating in concrete state of affairs – be it societal, evolutionary, or cosmic – that we can then explain the insistence of chaos in reality and the necessity of it being thought. What this means with respect to the unfolding of this chapter is, we can only begin from the vague yet concrete notion of the *Event*, to then subsequently characterize chaos. It is from this particular temporal vantage point that we will begin to uncover a very peculiar way of looking at the world.

First Approximation of Chaos: The Event

Serres, like Deleuze, is a philosopher of the event. With his eloquent style, Serres is able to enlighten a complex notion within our real experiences. To the question “What is an Event?” Serres replies: “... that bomb whose contingent newness interrupts a state of affairs that has been formatted for a long enough time to make people believe in its pereniality...”¹¹ In this simple quote, we are able to get a preliminary understanding of the event. First, we must uncover two distinctive planes that intersect this quote through and through. On the first plane, we have the state of affairs. This is undoubtably the plane most familiar to us, where actuality most viscerally unfolds before our eyes. It is the living present in which I write these very words, or equally so for you, as the reader, scanning over the text with your eyes. Hence Serres’ use of the term “formatted” which indicates to us the repetitive nature of such an experience, whereby the present envelops both past and future into its homogeneous milieu. This is the plane of empirical experience. We must also note its specific temporality. This empirical present envelops a linear

¹¹ Serres (2020) *Branches: A Philosophy of Time, Event and Advent*, p.98

flow, from the past to the future. Once again, it is an image of time that we are most familiar with, whereby reality is subsumed in the passing present. Henceforth, we will recognize this particular field of experience as the *Actual*.

However, Serres nor Deleuze reduce reality to its actuality. It should be clear in the aforementioned quote that Serres clearly wants to direct our attention to the *fragmentation* of our homogeneous present. This is the plane of the event, or what will be henceforth understood as the *Virtual*. “Bomb,” “contingent newness,” and “interrupts” are all means of highlighting the *emergence* of the event into the tranquility of the Actual. There is something about the event that renders it unexpected, almost entirely unforeseeable. While the actuality of the present is inescapable and the point at which anything happens truly occurs, the time of the event cannot be subsumed into a future present. Most peculiar, is this very indetermination of the event, that allows us to characterize it without specificity. As we will come to see, it is precisely the intriguing temporality of the virtual that will allow us to introduce the concept of chaos and creativity into our daily affairs. Why must we split reality onto the two planes? Why can't the temporality of the Actual grasp the dynamics of an event which ruptures its continuity? To answer these questions, we must look closer at the division we have evoked into the interdependent fields of the Virtual and the Actual.

So far, we saw Serres invoke a mysterious split between two planes of experience: on the one hand, we have that of concrete state of affairs (the actual), while on the other hand, we have a more ambiguous plane of events (the virtual). Thus, it appears as if we are attempting to divide reality into a strict duality. However, we must be vigilant not to reduce these two fields in such a manner. Rather, we must see their interpenetration, which has already been insinuated by Serres

at the beginning. The Virtual field in which we seek to get a better grasp of, already implicates itself into our familiar daily lives through a rupture – an event that breaks through the linearity of the actual. To get a better idea of the functioning of the virtual *within* the actual, let's use an example of the emergence of human life on Earth. From the perspective of the Actual, we would see such an emergence in evolutionary terms (historical), whereby through an immense period of time, single cellular organisms evolved into larger composite forms, all the way to the immense variations of complex life forms we see today. Yet, when Serres defines the event of humanity, his explanation goes much deeper than the surface sequence of evolution: “How should we define humanity? By this narrative of new and contingent events that are unpredictable before they occur but formatted as semi-necessary chain when drawn descending towards us.”¹² The essential aspect that Serres highlights here is the fact that with each movement contributing to the emergence of humanity, life, or the very universe itself, we necessarily presuppose a field by which novel events possess the *potentiality* to emerge and transform the current state of affairs into an unforeseen direction while simultaneously rewriting the past to affirm their possibility. It is this field of potentialities, or *ideal events* which precisely composes the virtual.

The difficulty we have in conceptualizing it is derived from the fact that these events are not stable object of representation but *singularities* which are subject to an entirely different temporality. Deleuze describes this complex temporality of events, or singularities as “*virtual* insofar as their emission and absorption, creation and destruction, occur in a period of time shorter than the shortest continuous period imaginable; it is this very brevity that keeps them subject to a principle of uncertainty or indetermination.”¹³ Thus, in some sense we can see a correspondence between the dynamics of the virtual and *accidents* within the actual. Such events

¹² Serres (2020) p.108

¹³ Deleuze & Parnet (2002) p.112

can be found in the ‘fluke’ in meeting one’s lifelong partner, all the way to the very genesis of life on earth.

The problem with examples such as the emergence of humanity is the fact that their necessity or possibility is diluted by the long history which is *our history*. To put it another way, the radical rupture the emergence of life has on earth is easily taken as obvious or given, insofar as we are the very product of such an event, obscuring the unforeseeable nature of the occurrence. Perhaps a better example would be the uncertainty that pervades all weather predictions in spite of all technological development. Edward Lorenz is most likely the notable thinker when it comes to approaching chaos and nature in its concrete manifestation. Lorenz most famously demonstrated that making weather forecasts based on nearly identical data sets resulted in radically different predictions.¹⁴ That is, even with computers accounting for numerous variables and their complex relations, tiny variations result in consequences that are wholly unpredictable. Perhaps this intriguing clash between chaos and the science is thus best demonstrated in NASA’s rocket launches, which in spite of all feats of engineering, physics and chemistry, still find themselves delayed by unforeseen ‘bad’ weather. With such examples, we might begin to see chaos lurks even in the areas that make the most profound prediction regarding the future.

Without losing ourselves in this virtual realm implicit in all things, we can see the importance of its relation to actual things or ‘occasions’ as Whitehead calls them, for all actualities necessarily derive from this domain prior to their persistence in the actual. The latter half of Serres definition of humanity clearly demonstrates how the actual propagation of this particular form is easily covered over by a ‘format’ which reduces it to mechanical repetition of

¹⁴ Lorenzelli (1995) *Essence of Chaos*, p.102

linear time, thereby obfuscating the singularity of humanities genesis: that is, the introduction of a novel difference into actuality. It is this implicit background of virtuality that subjects all things to uncertainty or a certain disquietude that we must bring into our general world-view, for it does not only complexify our understanding of the world, but most importantly discloses hidden potentialities always lurking beneath our rigidly formatted ways of seeing things.

Simultaneously, we must also see the critical importance of the actual in our understanding of the virtual. For, without bringing this obscure virtual field of potential to some sort of determination through actualization, the world as we know it would not come into existence. In short, there is a reciprocal presupposition between these two fields, and it is the intensive oscillation between them that defines both the unpredictability and determination of reality.

The Temporality of the Event

This, however, only brings us to the surface of the event, leading to an understanding that appears to implicate chaos at every turn. Chaos has always operated at the heart of Deleuze's entire oeuvre, whether it is *nonsense* in the Logic of Sense, *Difference in-itself* in Difference and Repetition or plainly chaos as such in *What is Philosophy?*. While the vast complexities of these various works have not been considered in full, we can nevertheless see how *chaos, understood as an indeterminant field of potentials, always remains immanent to even the most concrete things, deriving specifically from its temporal nature*. However, as such, we have not entirely conceptualized this unique temporality head-on; we have only grasped at it through the empirical *results* of an event. Here, we must look closely at how Deleuze in particular presents a unique perspective on the temporality of the event and the consequences it has for how we conceive the

relationship between the Actual and Virtual. In this respect, we must pay close attention to his brilliant work *The Logic of Sense* (1969).

Following Stoic logic, Deleuze's argument rests on a radical break in the way we see the world. This break will be present between cause and effect, or more poignantly, "between *things* and *events*".¹⁵ We will begin with causes; that is, the time of 'things'. According to Deleuze, the stoics see nature – all that truly *exists* – as made up of bodies and their mixtures.¹⁶ Furthermore, bodies and their mixture have a particular temporality: the present. As such, the only time that exist is the present; this is the time of *Chronos*.¹⁷ To give an idea of what Deleuze is trying to articulate here, we can think of a state of affairs such as writing, which requires the mixing of several bodies such as a pen, a piece of paper, and a writer. Their proximity and interaction can be enveloped in a variably extended present. However, we began by denoting this domain as causal, and as somehow split from effects. Thus, to follow the example just given, the effect would not be the words written as such; this would only be the addition of another body (the written words or sentences). Rather, "effects are ... properly speaking, "incorporeal" entities".¹⁸

Thus, incorporeal effects *do not exist*. Here, Deleuze is pointing us in the direction of a different temporality, as well as an obscure mode of being. It is true, incorporeal effects are caused by bodies and their mixtures; however, this does not preclude their *difference in nature*. Deleuze will oftentimes make the comparison between the relationship of a problem to a solution.¹⁹ We must think this paradigm beyond its basic application in mathematics to instances in the natural world, such as the problem of *life*. For example, humans are but one *solution* to the

¹⁵ Deleuze & Parnet (2002) p.47

¹⁶ Deleuze (1990) *The Logic of Sense*, p.4

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.4 & 62

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.4

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.54

very vague problem of life. Our actuality as human beings is defined in our very *response* the multiplicity of problems that suffuse life, while simultaneously providing the problem with its singularity. Sustenance is a particular problem a modes of life face, yet the responses to such a problem are going to vary greatly from species to species (for example, humans eating organic material while plants photosynthesizing with solar energy). More poignantly, Deleuze is trying to suggest that despite the obvious link between these two instances, there is nevertheless a fundamental rupture between the two. For example, do problems magically disappear when they are responded to? Common sense would like us to think so, however if we return to our example, we can clearly see that our human mode of existence is *but one response* to the problem of life that takes on variation at every turn. Birds, plants, and the millions of bacteria that populate earth at any given moment are all singular responses to the problem of life. But where does this variation come from?

Deleuze is clearly Bergsonian in this line of thinking, as we have already mentioned the clear foreground he establishes with the thinking of multiplicity and creative variation. With this brief interlude into the ‘problem’ of life, we see that while such a problem does not tangibly exist in the sense of a table or a chair, it nevertheless *virtually persists in its problematic mode at the surface of things*. What characterizes this problematic surface is precisely *ideal events*.²⁰ Events, being ideal and persisting at the surface if things, have a radically different mode of being and temporality as we have already alluded to. This is the time of Aion, as opposed to Chronos.²¹ From the standpoint of Aion, the thought of *becoming* takes a fundamental primacy.

How are we to think pure becoming? We must be sure not to fall into the trap of imagining some distant past or future ‘thing’ pushing or drawing all beings into motion. Rather,

²⁰ Ibid, p.53

²¹ Ibid p.162

we must think *pure* becoming, which essentially makes its passage ineffable to our common sense modes of thought. The way our perception functions in the world overlays it with clear cut borders, such as those between words, countries, or thoughts themselves. Contrary to this way of thinking, Deleuze captures the inexpressible becoming through the limit questions: “What is going to happen?” and “What has just happened?” insofar as they seize the “agonizing aspect of the pure event... that is always at the same time something which has just happened and something about to happen; never something which is happening [present].”²² In short, pure becoming at once evades the present *and* infinitely subdivides it, forcing the present into an unforeseeable future.

Thus, while ideal events are incorporeal and distinct from corporeal causality, Deleuze nevertheless allocates them a certain ‘quasi-causality’ which appears to invert the primacy of the present that seems so apparent to our empirical experience. The event from the standpoint of its actuality might be seen as an ‘accident’, however, this is to reduce the multiplicity of coexisting virtual potentialities to their summation. Hence the reason why Deleuze, throughout all his works, is continuously looking for alternative virtuality’s that open us onto novel modes of being. If we limit ourselves to the solutions, without engaging with the entire *problematic field* in which ideal events operate, then we are limiting our experience to modes of being that are not of our own making. In short, if we are to truly engage with events in the incorporeal sense, we must think beyond the bounds of actuality to see the flow of virtual potentialities teeming underneath every moment.

Time and Multiplicities

²² Ibid p.63

Serres is correct in stating that chaos appears to our common sense to just be “pure disorder”.²³ How though, can we get beyond the absurdist image of chaos that seems to enclose it? As most profoundly presented in the Existential philosophy of Camus, Absurdism sees chaos as the dissolution of all meaning and reality – an image that no doubt leaves us on the cusp of a nihilistic standpoint.²⁴ Serres on the other hand says “positive chaos” in spite of “the whole of reason protest[ing]”.²⁵ Clearly, the term positive here does not suggest a value judgement as in chaos is ‘good’, but rather seeing *indetermination positively* (productive). This perspective, it is true, is entirely relative. Typically, we see the acts of reason, representational thoughts, and concrete ‘givens’ as the positive, thus relegating error, uncertainty, or possibility to the negative. This image of thought pervades the entire history of Western thinking. In the simplest terms, Serres, like Deleuze, is completely inverting this classical image.

This radical shift can only be understood if we understand its basis in seeking the *conditions of real experience*. “Trying to think, trying to produce, presupposes the taking of risks, the living of one’s life, precisely, in the surge outside of the classings of the encyclopedias”.²⁶ Rather than giving primacy to our habitual actions and modes of thought which undoubtably solidify our day-to-day lives, Serres understands that these closed systems can themselves only arise out of the infinite openness of indetermination itself. This is because chaos is “open [...] is multiple, unexpected.”²⁷ Thus, chaos cannot simply be equated to disorder. In fact, what Deleuze and Serres are trying to tell us, is that chaos is the very *limit* of order. As

²³ Serres (1995) p.106

²⁴ Camus (2005) *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.26-29

²⁵ Serres (1995) p.98

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ ibid

such, the chaos is not *in* time, nor *in* space – for both space and time have a particular form. Rather, it is the very condition of their emergence.

However, this notion of multiplicity remains rather ambiguous, and we ought to consider it carefully to understand its critical importance to the division that has pervaded this chapter. The use of this notion derives from Bergson, who challenges the ontological basis of thinking with the predicative ‘One’ with the idea of the substantive multiplicity. In fact, our negligence of Bergson up until this point is rather naïve, insofar as the fundamental basis of the split between the Virtual and the Actual derives directly from him.²⁸ Bergson sees all things as composite in nature, and we can break these down into *two types of multiplicities*. Firstly, we have *extensive multiplicities*, which are “numerical... *discontinuous, and actual*.”²⁹ In short, these are spatial in format, and coincide with what we’ve been describing as the Actual. However, there is another kind of multiplicity that corresponds more generally to what Deleuze and Serres refer to with the term: that is, *intensive multiplicities* as “pure duration” which are “*virtual and continuous*”.³⁰

Serres and Deleuze draw our attention to the relation between multiplicity taken in the substantive with the very birth of time itself. It is easier to think of chaos as some primordial state of reality; indeed, often one gets the impression that this is what Serres is trying to convince us of. However, it is thinking chaos in terms of time which allows us to imbed the indeterminate chaos into every moment.

“Time is a threshold between disorder and redundancy, it is the multiplicity next to chaos and prior to all spatialities. It is the first injection of redundancy into a pure multiplicity.”³¹

²⁸ Bergson (2001) *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*.

²⁹ Deleuze (1966) *Bergsonism*, p.38

³⁰ *Ibid* & Bergson (2001) p.122

³¹ Serres (1995) p.117

It is precisely here where we see the fine line separating our very reality from pure chaos. The genesis of time marks the very limit of our understanding, because prior to it, there can be no consistency: without redundancy, all habits, pulsation, or coherence cannot be achieved since there is no means for unification. However, just because time allows for redundancy does not mean it can be reduced to mechanical repetition. Mechanical repetition, or the normative image of linear time as a successive series of instances, essentially fails to capture the raw openness of time understood as *duration*. While the living present might be the locus of experience, it is itself coextensive with the ‘primordial time’ of duration which perpetually diverts the living present into unforeseen futures. This particular image of time can undoubtedly be seen in Deleuze’s contrast between the time of Aion and Chronos explored above.

Hence the critical importance of Bergson, which so often gets distorted as a naïve vitalist. It is only when we understand duration as the insistent novelty in the world that we are able to progressively conceive the productive indetermination of reality (freedom).³² We have already seen that clarity of such coexistence of two temporalities in the case of the event: seemingly random emergences of unforeseen creations pervade and fundamental constitute the very grounds of actuality. However, in the actualization of events, they cross a threshold subjecting them to mechanical repetition, providing the grounds for an enduring life.

Concluding remarks

Before concluding this chapter, it is worthwhile to recapitulate some of the central themes we have been dealing with here, to ensure we understand why we are taking up this undoubtedly

³² Bergson (2002) *Key Writings*, p.231

strange view of reality. We began with a rather confused image of the world, and for some readers this confusing might be persisting until this point. The implicit problematic that has been guiding our approach has been the fact that the dogmatic mode in which we approach reality is fundamentally reductive. Take the most prominent example of the subject-object dichotomy that places an essential rift between us as cognitive human beings, and everything else in nature. This view obtained its philosophic quintessence in Descartes, and continues to pervade the common sense outlook on the world, insofar as it is an integral feature of the very structure of language.³³ Instead of perpetuating such a divide, we have posited a very different divide – one that does not seek to separate reality in an irreconcilable way. We have done this through the idea of the Virtual and the Actual and their dynamic interplay. This interplay, rather than being mutually exclusive, is one of coexistence. We might say in simple terms that, rather than segmenting reality into two incompatible halves, this perspective rests on the fact that the flow of reality is contingent on the simultaneity of the abstract poles of pure becoming and pure presence. The reality in which we inhabit is at once neither a fixed actuality with a linear outcome of possibilities, nor an abstract realm of pure virtuality's expressing infinite becoming's. For the world to be as it is, it requires the interdependence of both of these critical elements. If we have more prominently emphasized the virtual half over that of the actual, it is because our common sense way of perceiving the world tends to over indulge in the latter, hence contributing to a reductive image of reality.

We now return to the question that initially brought us upon the relevance of chaos: why must Sociology think chaos, multiplicity, and a radically open form of time? It is my hope that in

³³ Bohm (2002) *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*; & Fromm (2013) *To Have or To Be*.

the segments prior, on the issue of our supposed rational thought confronting chaos, it was clear that this discomfort and challenge to thought was an essential aspect pertaining to the question at hand. By inverting the classical image of thought whereby reason reigns supreme, and instead relegating it to the negative, we have radically challenged what we even mean by thinking.

What we have begun to see is thought's fundamental relation to an *outside* – an indeterminate field of possible modes of thought. However, as Deleuze and Guattari note in *Anti-Oedipus*, mediating the indetermination of this outside is precisely the object of the socius: its role is precisely to code and overlay thought to have a particular (normative) sense.³⁴ It would be wrong to assume any of these thinkers are simply trying to eradicate this tendency towards consistency: without it, we might truly live in a Hobbesian state of nature. Their primary concern is when thought itself becomes entirely subservient to a particular image, preventing truly creative productions (events; revolution). That is, when thought is incapable of think *what it is not already thinking*.

Serres sees this tendency already taking place, in particular with the scientific fields of study, as he says: “the scientific community is in danger of arming itself less to ensure discovery or invention, than inventions are advertised in order to ensure the status of the scientific community”.³⁵ In short, when a field becomes more preoccupied with maintaining itself as a particular field, its thought falls into a stasis, and it is this stasis which we so often identify as the ‘fine thinking’ of a domain. Yet, once again we must ask, is an individual or group really thinking if it prohibits divergences which are responsible for its very emergence as a particular field? The tension at the heart of this problematic is essentially double:

³⁴ Deleuze & Guattari (1972) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.139

³⁵ Serres (1995) p.105

“... we must think on the side of the thinkable, that we must tack toward science, toward the same, toward the one and stability, *but that we must then* be ready to think the unthinkable, that we must then change our tack, toward the pure multiple, we are continually tacking back and forth, the method being a fractal meander, to one side for safety, to the other for freedom...”³⁶

It is precisely this perpetual oscillation that we have been trying to characterize in this chapter: between chaos and our habitus, the indeterminant and the determinant, intensive and extensive multiplicities.

We saw throughout this chapter that chaos, or the indeterminate does not need to be relegated to the negative of reasonable thought. In fact, when we begin to see indetermination as positive potentiality, we in fact liberate ourselves to the very openness and truth of the world itself. To relegate the chaotic to the negative is to subsume ourselves in the stupor of opinion and deny thought its significance. As Deleuze and Guattari say: “the less people take thought seriously, the more they think in conformity with what the State wants”.³⁷ What thinking chaos means for Sociology in particular, involves taking risks, utilizing our creative intuition, and confronting the dogmatism that we so comfortably find ourselves in. It is my hope that this very work itself contributes to the divergence it seeks to articulate.

In what comes to follow, we will be building off the insights of this chapter to challenge and further develop arguably one of the most critical concepts in sociology developed by George Herbert Mead: the Self. The importance of the self in Mead is clear: it is a means of

³⁶ *ibid*, p.114

³⁷ Deleuze & Guattari (1987) *A Thousand Plateau's: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.376

characterizing the human individual as they develop in *social* circumstances.³⁸ While this is clearly an emaciated description of the self, the role of the following chapter will be to break down in greater detail Mead's understanding of it, placing particular emphasis on its temporal and creative aspects. As we will come to see, Mead allows for creativity and indetermination to flow through the self, but nevertheless struggles to conceptualize such aspect (as seen in his understanding of the "I"). Therefore, the latter half of the chapter will focus on a novel conjunction that seeks to unite Mead's conceptualization of the self with the outside.

³⁸ Mead (1934) *Mind, Self, and Society*.

Chapter 2: The Self and the Outside of Thought

What are we to respond to the question: “Who are you”? Who is James, the author of this text, or who are you, there reader of this text? Do we respond with our name, hobbies, or simply personal characteristics? Is not the reality of our most assured thing, that is, our very self, not the most obvious experience to appeal to? The ambiguity associated with such questions are derived from the object of this chapter: the Self. Many academics question the nature of the self, yet seem only to obscure this "thing" common to us all. This question is further complexified by the fact that the first chapter arose from the post-structuralist tradition, where the question of self is almost entirely absolved from any consideration. This of course, goes hand in hand with *not* looking at the reality of things from their seemingly immutable appearance as clear-cut objects (identities), but rather from the perspective that these forms are derived from an intensive flux or chaotic multiplicity.

However, we are of the opinion that the destruction of the self is not the primary intent of post-modern thought as such, but rather, following Leonard Lawlor, that this period (particularly in France) is primarily concerned with a necessary renewal of thought: thinking has fallen into a rigid stasis.³⁹ The question therefore begs, how can we escape this innocuous stagnation? From the beginning, we have been implicitly answering this question: thought must think the *outside*. But this outside is not the Transcendent realm of Platonic Ideas, which places a fundamental rift between the essence of things and their appearance in reality, rather, it is the *immanent* and *problematic field* which we have disclosed by the name of the *Virtual*. We are thereby seeking

³⁹ Lawlor (2003) *Thinking Through French Philosophy*, p.123

the conditions of real experience that remain enveloped within the folds of actual experience itself (a *Transcendental Empiricism* in Deleuze's terms).⁴⁰ Not only does thinking this outside get thought thinking again, but more importantly, it allows us to conceive of the whole (of reality) in a *de-fragmented* way. As we saw, this field is not filled with extensive objects or representation which provide a certain ease to thought, but is rather transfused with indetermination and unforeseen possibilities.

Yet, with such a complex or chaotic field, how can it possibly relate in anyway to the seemingly most personal object of our own experiences; that is, the self? To clarify the seemingly abstract nature of this conjunction, we will approach its dissemination beginning with George Herbert Mead. We begin with Mead for several reasons. Primarily, it is due to the central focus placed on the question of self throughout his entire oeuvre: the self is not merely an abstract entity somehow separable from the living individual - it represents a fundamental facet of the individual's social existence; that is, its is a social object.⁴¹ The importance of such a perspective cannot be undermined, insofar as it clearly challenges many of the philosophic presuppositions (stemming from Descartes) that have detached the self from our lived experience and its empirical genesis. With Mead, we see the essential sociality that lies at the heart of the self; we are not born with such an envelopment, rather, it is the product of our complex *intensive encounters*.⁴² The self is part of a dynamic genesis that is continuously modulated with every experience, and thus cannot be abstracted from the immanence of such interactions. In short, we not only see that the Self is not some abstract metaphysical entity, but it is something deeply entrenched in disparate aspects of our daily lives.

⁴⁰ Deleuze (2001) *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, p.29

⁴¹ Mead (1964) *Selected Writings*, p.142; & Mead, (1934) p.140

⁴² Mead (1934) p.135

Thus, this chapter will seek to join the conclusion of the previous chapter, whereby we broke down Serres' call for fields such as Sociology to think chaos, to the way we think about one of the most fundamental unities at the heart of social interactions. To do so will require us to present then problematize the typical approach Mead's concept of self, based on our recently acquired understanding of the virtual. The first object of analysis will thus be Mead's pragmatic approach to the self: what are the components of the self? How does language mediate such a construction? What is the role of the generalized other in this dynamic genesis? Such questions not only provide a preliminary introduction to our analysis of the Self, but simultaneously hints at the relevance of such an undertaking to our more general consideration of idolization, which will be examined in more detail in the following chapter.

Following this, we will expand Mead's notion as complementary to the intensive field of desire highlighted in *Anti-Oedipus*. While it is clear that Deleuze and Guattari are by no means focused on an analysis of selfhood, the implication of their work nevertheless gives rise to a new image of self and the underlying dynamics that give rise to it. This marks the critical necessity of such a conjunction: Mead's approach seemingly lacks sufficient input from a sub-representation field (of desire) that underpins certain fundamental aspects of self, such as its virtual potentialities that open us onto unforeseeable paths. In short, the goal of this chapter will be to present Mead's conception of the Self in conjunction with Deleuze and Guattari's dynamics of desire, as a baseline for the field of interaction between individuals and celebrity idols (which will be observed in the final chapter).

Mead's Concept of Self

We will take the self from its evolutionary perspective, approaching it from its developmental standpoint as Mead so frequently does. For, one of the essential points Mead makes with regard to the Self is the fact that we *do not* possess it from birth - rather, it is a product of our envelopment in a social milieu. Thus, if we are to sufficiently appreciate Mead's ingenuity with regards to the very genesis of self, we must begin with the field we are immersed in at birth that underlies constitutive facets of self. Due to the fact that Mead wants to naturalize the concept of self and render it as something pragmatic - that is, useful in our daily lives - we must be sure to absolve any link with its typical conception from Descartes. Mead does so on two fronts: first, he situates the emergence of the self within the evolutionary process of nature, and secondly, utilizes a parallelist paradigm to eradicate any substance dualism.⁴³ As a brief introduction to the thought of Mead, these two points will serve as our point of departure whereby the Self is radically transformed into a pragmatic concept.

The first point, and most likely one of the most important, is the fact that Mead situates the self *within* nature and its development over time. As such, evolutionary thinking is not in any sense unique to Mead, yet the manner in which he utilizes it to pervade his concept of self makes for a unique expression of its relevance. The centrality of such an idea is affirmed by Mead himself, when he says: "What I am trying to do is connect this entire evolutionary process with social organization in its most complex expression".⁴⁴ Without even getting into the dynamics of the self, we can see how emergence, or the *evental character of things* already plays a critical

⁴³ Self as evolutionary process, see Mead (1936) *The Problem of Society – How we Become Selves*; on mind-body parallelism, see Mead (1934) p.50

⁴⁴ Mead (1936) p.30

role in his thought. Mead very rarely qualifies the self with descriptions of what it 'is', rather, he will always emphasize the very becoming of selfhood. For example (and this point will no doubt emphasize later on), the two central components of the self - the 'I' and the 'me' - are not considered two static pieces that make a whole, but rather are seen as "phases" of the self in actuality.⁴⁵ This reiterates the point we had already seen at the beginning of this segment, where we noted we are not born with selves, but acquire them over time. Rather than positing a split between two planes of experience (or substances), the "biologic individual" in its very conduct becomes the logical antecedent to the emergence of the self.⁴⁶ A point that necessarily follows from this is the fact that the human individual is no longer placed in a radical heterogeneity with the world, but is seen as a natural development from within. It is on this basis, it seems to me, that Mead is able to ground his pragmatic theory of self (which we will see below).

The second argument, that of a mind-body parallelism drawn from Wundt, serves to further ground in empirical terms what we have already stated thus far. The particular inadequacy of Modern thought of the self is its separation from the corporeal aspects of our existence. Rather than positing an absolute rift between the contents of consciousness and the body or external world, the principle of parallelism posits that "what takes place in consciousness runs parallel with what takes place in the central nervous system".⁴⁷ For Mead, the critical factor unifying the physiological and the psychological can be precisely found in *action*, hence its central positioning within the greater framework of all his writings.⁴⁸ Having firmly situated his position on this front, Mead will henceforth not bother himself with the question of

⁴⁵ Mead (1934) p.178

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.347-353

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.19

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.21

any mind-body dualism, insofar as it becomes a real impossibility from the perspective of conduct.

With these two initial points, we are able to isolate Mead in his endeavor from the thought of those before him on the nature of self and mind. We must now further concretize Mead's approach to the self through his detailed analysis of its development. In doing so, we will enable ourselves to see the finer points which both distinguish weak aspects of his approach along with the very reason we ought to utilize a theory of self in our analysis of our contemporary social world. To do this, we will follow the development of conduct - action - as the fundamental unit of analysis that functions as a guiding thread throughout Mead's entire oeuvre.⁴⁹ What is crucial for Mead in this respect is the *expressive* nature of conduct, for it is clear that living beings far less 'intelligent' than human beings are capable of communicative gestures that do not possess the same function as language as such. This is a practical starting point for Mead, as we have already seen his evolutionary argument is central to his entire paradigm. Yet, it is clear that a 'conversation of gestures' does not contain the same explicit content as a linguistic or symbolic conversation. An encounter between two dogs on the street would surely involve various gestures - sniffing, licking, barking, growling, etc. - but we cannot say there is a clear passage of significance between the two. The point Mead would like to emphasize in starting here, is not simply to point out the obvious that animals such as dogs cannot communicate like human beings, but more importantly, that these *gestures*, present in various lifeforms, construct the basis for an interactive field.⁵⁰ It further demonstrates the social

⁴⁹ This is abundantly clear throughout nearly all essay's composed by Mead, but most evidently in the collection of essays found in *The Philosophy of the Act* (1938)

⁵⁰ Mead (1934) p.53

nature of conduct between selves - the end product of our investigation - is not present at this level of conduct, but nevertheless implies these fundamental dynamics of interaction.

The key to reaching the difference between human life and all other forms of life lies, no doubt, in our communicative capacities. It is not simply the fact that we can communicate with each other, but more so *how* we communicate with each other. On top of interacting through gestures, we simultaneously utilize what Mead calls *significant symbols*.⁵¹ At this point, how we get from a non-significant field of gestures to one of significant symbols is critical, and essentially requires our *embeddedness in a socio-linguistic milieu*.⁵² It is here too where the difference between conscious experience and *self-conscious* experience marks a critical juncture. To be self-conscious implies cognitive acts of *reflexivity*, which denotes the function of the mind, and as Mead tells us: “only selves have minds, that is, that cognition only belongs to selves...”⁵³ But how does reflexivity or self-consciousness come about? Mead explains this development through two stages: that of play, and games.⁵⁴ Engaging in acts of play, the child takes on various roles, from doctors to firefighters, where they are required to take on the perspective of an *other*. This process is further solidified in the later engagement in games, such as tag or soccer, where play has been extended to incorporate *rules of conduct* that mediate the actions of oneself and others.⁵⁵ Throughout these social engagements, what is crucial for us is the fact that the child progressively develops a sense of the *generalized other*, for it is *through* the other that an individual is capable of reflexively grasping itself as a social object (a self).⁵⁶

⁵¹ Ibid, p.55

⁵² Ibid, p.62

⁵³ Ibid, p.134; & Mead (1925) *The Genesis of Self and Social control*, p.185; Found in (2002) *The Philosophy of the Present*

⁵⁴ Mead (1925) p.191

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Mead (1934) p.154-155; & Abbott (2020) *The Self as the Locus of Morality: A Comparison Between Charles Taylor and George Herbert Mead's Theories of the Moral Constitution of the Self*.

It is only at this point, several years into a child's life, that we can speak of the individual possessing a 'self' and its specific dynamics. Here is where the phase of the self which Mead denotes as the 'me' becomes most apparent: it articulates our capacity to reflexively grasp ourselves (as object).⁵⁷ But such an occurrence is functionally contingent on the enveloping "the attitudes of the others" which *organizes* the 'me'.⁵⁸ Yet, the self cannot simply be reduced to this reflexive grasp as Mead keenly recognizes. There are segments of ourselves, particularly apparent in our *actions*, which escape the organization of the 'me' which go beyond our reflexive grasp and anticipations. This part or phase of the self is taken as the 'I' as Mead tells us it is "uncertain" and "will contain a novel element".⁵⁹ However, other than this spontaneous and creative characterization of the 'I', Mead provides little justification as to its basis which has been justifiably commented on.⁶⁰ There is no doubt that such an unexpectedness is implicit within every action, but is it sufficient to merely label it as 'spontaneous'? It seems to me that the function of the 'I' operates at the limit of Mead's method, where we cross from the scientific and reflexive realm of the 'me' to the *immanent* and metaphysical realm of the 'I' which essential operates pre-reflexively. This becomes more problematic when we remember that Mead's evolutionary perspective is also presented *hierarchically* insofar as he views *intelligence* as one of the central developments in humans.⁶¹ The problem that we are trying to disclose here, which is intimately related to the function of the 'I', is the fact that it is not simply human beings that act creatively. Does not creativity flow throughout the whole evolutionary process of life, let alone the unfolding of the universe itself to provide the conditions for the emergence of life?

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.140

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.175

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.176-177

⁶⁰ See Aboulafia (1986) *The Mediating Self: Mead, Sartre, and Self-determination* p.25

⁶¹ Mead (1936) p.23

Here we must shift gears and return to the domain from which we began: the Virtual. While having explored this domain with regards to creative emergences (events) at a very general level, it is at this point we must demonstrate its intricate relation within our very own experience. Mead has clearly drawn our attention to this domain but does not provide us the conceptual tools to grasp its *unconscious and pre-reflexive dynamics*. Thus, we must turn to the works of Deleuze and Guattari, where the idea of the unconscious and its syntheses holds the center of their focus.

The Sub-representational field of Desire

There is no doubt that Mead is able to provide us with a very concrete image of the development of Self along with its fundamental social basis. However, as we saw near the end of the last segment, there were two critical points where Mead's theory of self fell short in its explanation: firstly, in his interpretation of the function of thought, being understood as merely a medium of representation, and secondly, his understanding of the "I" as the spontaneous aspect of the self. As such, we are not in complete disagreement with Mead's articulation on these points, however, neither do we think he takes these points far enough.

In truth, it is precisely around these two points that this segment will unfold, as we believe it is the creative aspects of the "I" that provides a link to Deleuze and Guattari's immanent field of desire, along with the fact that thought cannot be limited to the field of representation insofar as it is essentially connected to the sub-representation syntheses of desire. While this unconscious realm is clearly obscure, this segment will progressively unfold the dynamics of such a space to justify its relevance to the development of our self. By shifting our

perspective on these two key facets of the self, we will thus be able to provide a novel image of its practical and analytics usage in our daily lives. Furthermore, it is through Deleuze and Guattari's unique understanding of desire that the practical nature of the first chapter will begin to unfold. The dynamics that they attribute to the field of desire are to be understood as Virtual or unconscious, underlying the production of the Real.⁶²

It must be noted, however, that we are walking upon novel terrain here. To my knowledge, there has been no prior literature attempting to contrast these radically different perspectives together. For this very reason, and in a Deleuzian fashion, our goal here is not to provide a complete analytic comparison between the entire oeuvres of Mead nor Deleuze. Our aim is rather to rejuvenate the thought of both of these thinkers in areas they both hold the potential to restore significance. For Mead, this is clearly the concept of the self that is almost entirely absent from Deleuze, while simultaneously Mead's concept of self appears to remain incomplete in its consideration of thought and creativity, where Deleuze maintains important lines of continuity. Hence, it is within these fine lines that our discussion will proceed, focusing our attention on where we can create transversal connections between the two, potentiating novel thoughts for new insights in the future.

The BwO or Intensive spatium of Desire

Of critical importance to our investigation, in particular our analysis that will be pursued in the following chapter, is the notion of desire. Desire, like the concept of self, is one we are all 'seemingly' familiar with. Especially when we consider our current socio-cultural environment as

⁶² Deleuze (1995) *Negotiations – 1972-1990*, p.19

it is bound up with consumption, it is no surprise that desire re-emerges as a crucial analytic concept: our lives seem so caught up in the tug of desire towards different products. Yet, desire as it is understood philosophically and psychoanalytically - where it is primarily utilized - has a very different connotation than the tug towards different objects. Nevertheless, desire taken in the transitive sense most acutely coincides with its psychoanalytic usage, which is conceived of being based on a Lack.⁶³ That is, desire is typically understood in terms of an internal void that induces the feeling of lack for a particular ‘thing’. While we will not go into the specific details of this particular conception, it is still useful as a reminder for those unfamiliar with the works of Deleuze and Guattari that their conception runs counter to such an interpretation. Rather than conceiving desire as a lack (of something), they see desire as *immanently productive*.⁶⁴ What is implied in such a shift is a radical reconsideration of what desire truly consists of, at the same time as we expand its potential usage. As we will come to see, this entails a novel approach to the unconscious which will no longer be a locus for repressed fantasies, but an intensive spatium for experimentation and novel productions.

As we saw with the previous chapter, our shift in focus to a unique domain (the virtual) implicit within actual experience coincides with a step away from the traditional subject-object dichotomy. This split is apparent with the treatment of desire, when it is considered merely from the perspective of the *desiring* (subject) and the *desired* (object). Such a paradigm merely reduced desire to cause and effect, that is, “to a dualist vision of things, and that it thereby makes any serious approach to the question impossible”.⁶⁵ This perspective is representative of a

⁶³ Lacan (2019) *Desire and its Interpretations: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan; Book VI*, p.23

⁶⁴ Deleuze and Guattari (1972) p.26

⁶⁵ Lyotard (2013) *Why Philosophize?* p. 20

significant portion of the post-modern period, including that of Deleuze and Guattari. Yet if this is the case, how are we to understand the notion of desire?

It seems to me that Claire Colebrook presents what Deleuze and Guattari are trying to get at with the notion of desire without being over complexified and maintaining its essential features: “Pre-personal desire is simply the flow and force of life, prior to any organized identity or hint of stability”.⁶⁶ At once we notice desire is prior to the subject insofar as it is pre-personal, and simultaneously prior to any extensive object, insofar as it comes before any “hint of stability”. We also see the introduction of two extremely important concepts with regards to desire - that of flow and force. Implied in these terms is a novel dynamic of energetic vitality; one which requires our poignant attention. Hence, the critical importance of our point of departure in the first chapter of thinking the Virtual, since our considerations of desire bring us right back to this domain. At the same time, however, we are greatly expanding this notion of the virtual to see its underlying implication in our lived experience. Desire, as presented by Deleuze and Guattari, is precisely the medium that unites this obscure virtual realm with actual experience as desire pervades not only us as human beings, but the very world we live in.

If we are to grasp the dynamics of desire which prove to be fundamental to the thought of Deleuze and Guattari, we must begin by understanding the realm in which it plays out - that is, we must submerge ourselves into the *unconscious*. Following Daniel W. Smith, one of the few contemporary thinkers to clarify Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the unconscious, demonstrates how deeply Nietzschean and Leibnizian it is.⁶⁷ We are referring here, of course, to Nietzsche's perspectivism of drives, and Leibniz's minute inclinations, which constitute the differential forces of the unconscious. Without going into the particularities of these

⁶⁶ Colebrook (2002) *Understanding Deleuze*, p.105

⁶⁷ Smith (2012) *Essays on Deleuze*, p.178

perspectives, what is important for us is the idea that the unconscious contains a *multiplicity* of coexisting drives which are often times contradictory to each other. The importance of this field becomes relevant when we consider the basis for action, which brings us directly in tandem with Mead's thought on the creativity of the 'I'. Take, for example, the deliberation required when going out for a walk. Such a moment implies a multiplicity of drives or 'tugs' that pull in various directions: some are conducive to going out for a walk, such as the beautiful weather, having spent the entire day inside, or simply just wanting to get some exercise. On the other hand, there coexist with these conducive drives others that pull us in a different direction, such as a scheduled meeting coming up, a paper that needs to be completed for the following day, or even the slight feeling of hunger. Even with such a mundane act such as going for a walk, we can see how various drives take part in the production of our act, regardless of whether or not conscious deliberation is involved. Such a field articulates why Deleuze and Guattari conceive of the unconscious as a *differential field of forces*, insofar as it is the positive indeterminacy of such virtual elements and their particular intensities that constitute the actualization of a determinant act.⁶⁸ What ultimately comes to determine a particular act is the difference of intensity between the drives, where the power of one supersedes all others, catalyzing into us *actually* going out for a walk or not.

As we saw with Mead, creativity plays an important role in our understanding of the Self. Action, as we saw, contains elements of uncertainty that cannot be grasped prior to their actualization. However, Mead relegates these unexpected *responses* to the act of the "I" with little explanation.⁶⁹ While it is true, these acts are performed pre-reflectively and are thus only retroactively grasped by the individual themselves, Mead is unable to provide the sufficient

⁶⁸ Deleuze (1994) *Difference and Repetition*, p.139

⁶⁹ Mead (1934) p.175

reason for such acts to be creative, other than their spontaneity character. It seems to me that Deleuze and Guattari rid Mead's 'I' of its miraculating powers, providing it with a sufficient basis in a differential unconscious. Rather than presupposing a harmonious "I" behind every act, in the sense of a transcendental ego, we should rather think of a multiplicity of I's or 'larval selves' as Deleuze calls them.⁷⁰ The "me" or the self taken as object, is precisely the retroactive grasp of ourselves that covers over the implicit dynamics of the contesting drives that make up desire. It has a particular coherence different to that of the 'I' precisely because it is the summation of their interaction, into a specific act.

We can already begin to see that the conjunction between Mead and Deleuze does not require us to take one side over another. This fractured I is fundamentally related to Deleuze and Guattari's experimentalism, which follows from the Spinozist idea that "we do not even know what a body can do...".⁷¹ Much of our capacities and drives remain vacuolized in particular arrangements of desire or a style of self that are rigid and allow little exploration, denigrating the very essence of creative potentiality that lies within the unconscious. In short, the multiplicity of the I gets reduced to habits or a presupposed harmony. To experiment – to dive into the depths of the unconscious – is *not* to destroy the self, for it is our tether to the social world. Rather, it is a proposition for a new way of thinking about *action* and what we actual *can do*. For example, by limiting the body to its particular organ functions gives us an extremely poor idea of what a given body is actually capable of doing. This is why Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that the Body without Organs (the plane of immanence particular to desire) is itself a "set of *practices*".⁷²

⁷⁰ Deleuze (1994) p.103

⁷¹ Spinoza (1985) *Ethics*, Book III, 2, scholium.

⁷² Deleuze & Guattari (1987) p.150

To suggest that they are glorifying the schizophrenic as a clinical entity is to completely misunderstand their argument, along with the reason why the schizophrenic is central to their analysis of capitalism.⁷³ The centrality of the schizophrenic in their two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* is instead to disclose the very functioning of desire and its capacity to make transversal connection between heterogeneous elements, giving rise to *truly creative thoughts and acts*. It is this very flow of desire that we have been discussing throughout this text in regard to the dynamics of the Virtual multiplicities or the unconscious.

The main confrontation that we then see between Mead and Deleuze is the goal of their investigation and the particularity of the *plane* of observation it unfolds on. For Mead, it is clear that he is looking to uncover the basis by which we become selves or relatively stable subjects, whereas for Deleuze, this stability marks the habit of tending towards a zone of comfort rather than exploring the depths of the unconscious. We can think of these two perspectives as two planes as Deleuze and Guattari do in *A Thousand Plateaus*: on the one hand, we have a *plane of organization*, which “always concerns the development of forms and the formation of subjects”, on the other hand, there is a *plane of immanence*, where “there are only relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between unformed elements...”.⁷⁴ What is important however, is not this seeming duality between two processes, but their *mutual interpenetration*. For it is the unformed elements which are collected and concretized in one direction – giving rise to a self, for example – while in the other, seemingly stable forms are perpetually broken down and recomposed. We can interpret this oscillatory movement as precisely that movement between the relatively stable self and flux of desire. Mead, no less than Deleuze recognizes this

⁷³ As Byung-Chul Han does, in *The Topology of Violence* (2018)

⁷⁴ Deleuze & Guattari (1987) p.265-266

movement, in particular with regards to the movement of Society,⁷⁵ but it appears to be easily lost in the schematic organization of the self. Hence, the true force of Deleuze and Guattari's work is precisely their attempt to establish a "perceptual semiotics" whereby we see things *from the middle* – we must grasp not simply stable 'things' but the incessant movement that both contributes to their construction and dissolution over time.⁷⁶ This is precisely the analytics focus of their project, which puts *desire* at the centerfold of not just subjective experience, but politics as well. Only then can we understand why Deleuze and Guattari cry: "*There is only desire and the social and nothing else*".⁷⁷

What we have not made sufficiently clear thus far, and what marks the true complexity of Deleuze and Guattari's thought, is the fact that their theory of desire is precisely a general theory of *energetics* which is inextricably bound with the two ways of thinking about *time* seen in the first chapter. Of course, in *Anti-Oedipus*, we see the flow and coagulation of this energy in direct relation to individuals and society in general, however, in the transition to the second volume, *A Thousand Plateaus*, we see a great expansion of the notion of desire to even non-human domains such as geology or biochemistry.⁷⁸ It is in this way that Deleuze and Guattari establish a very real philosophy of *becoming* that not only testifies to the evolution of life, but to the unfolding of reality itself.

Once again, this in no way precludes the genesis of a self as a legitimate entity, so long as we remember that such an entity marks a rupture in the flow of human life, giving rise to *novel flows which can be the source of various social objects*. Returning to the initial definition present

⁷⁵ Mead (1936) p.21: as he calls it the "problem of Society"

⁷⁶ Deleuze & Guattari (1987) p.23

⁷⁷ Deleuze & Guattari (1972) p. 29

⁷⁸ Deleuze & Guattari (1987) p.40-74; Plateau (chapter) #3

by Claire Colebrook at the beginning of this segment, we can see now that the force of desire is never truly ‘yours’ nor ‘mine,’ but rather the energy of time continuously pushing *us* into an unknown future.

A New (Temporal) Image of Self

Stepping away from the complexities both Mead and Deleuze bring to the question of self, how can we reconceive this notion in light of our analysis? This question returns us to the original impetus that sparked the connection between such radically different perspectives on the self in the first place; with Deleuze, we seem to lose sight of the self’s concrete involvement in the social world, whereas with Mead we get the sense that the vitality of the self is overwhelmed by its objectified form in social conduct. The focus of this chapter hinged precisely on rejuvenating Mead’s understanding of self with vitality, while simultaneously providing Deleuze’s approach with a more tangible footing into the concrete social reality of the self.

However, our considerations of Mead have remained for the most part within his typical interpretation, neglecting his philosophic work on *time*. Due to the fact that Mead’s *Philosophy of the Present* (1932) is not primarily concerned with the self, it seems to get lost under the sway of more decisive text on the topic. Yet, if we are to draw any serious conclusion on the notion of self as it is articulated between Mead and Deleuze, this text must be of primary importance to us. This is the case not only because we have been contrasting Mead to Deleuze, who’s entire oeuvre essentially revolves around his understanding of time, but also because there are critical aspects of Mead’s understanding of the present that illuminate his concept of self. By paying

close attention to Mead's approach to time, this final segment will demonstrate how these two thinkers are working much more closely than we initially might have thought.

We will recall from the first chapter, in our discussion of Deleuze and the temporality of the event, we suggested that only the present truly 'exists', however, the something else 'inheres' or 'insists' which cannot be said to exist in the same way as the present. In a similar fashion, Mead asserts the primacy of the present as the locus of reality or existence, with the same caveat that runs through Deleuze: "Existence involves non-existence; it does take place. *The world is a world of events*" (italics added).⁷⁹ We can immediately see that Mead is confronted with the same issue that Deleuze's entire work revolves around: the question of novelty and its place in nature. In fact, Mead reaffirms this point as the central drive behind this work on time:

"It is the task of the philosophy of today to bring into congruence with each other this universality of determination which is the text of modern science, and the emergence of the novel, which belongs not only to the experience of the human organisms, but is formed also in a nature which science and the philosophy that has followed it have separated from human nature."⁸⁰

On this simple yet decisive quote coalesces not only the thought of Mead and Deleuze, but equally so the drive of this very work. The advances of modern sciences have clearly had a significant impact on some of the most decisive issues of our time, yet something always seems to fall through the cracks of these scientific discoveries. It is true that contemporary science has begun to think about emergence and its relevance to the scientific method, especially with the

⁷⁹ Mead (2002) *The Philosophy of the Present*, p.35

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.45-6

developments in quantum physics, but by no means has it become the standard.⁸¹ The problem we, just like Mead, are confronted with is the fact that the world of science presents an image of time that for the most part seeks to nullify novelty rather than accentuate it.

Returning to Mead's thought on time, we must ask how he conceives of this 'present' if it is to overcome the linear temporal image of discrete events as the sciences sees it. Despite Mead retaining the word 'present', he disfigures it in such a way that it can no longer be associated with archaic metaphysics of identity. The present, rather, is defined by "its becoming and disappearing" and "is not a piece cut out anywhere from the temporal dimension of uniformly passing reality. *Its chief reference is to the emergent event...*".⁸² It becomes evident from this that Mead is not talking about some point in space or time, but rather an indefinite *process* of emergence with many characteristics discussed in the first chapter. Still, it remains unclear what Mead means by emergence, for it is on this point that his entire argument on the present rests. Emergence is the critical term for Mead because it implies a radical departure on two fronts: not only the emergent "not there in advance," implying a critique of the foreseeable future, but simultaneously it "rewrites its past", suggesting a break with deterministic past.⁸³ These two points are ultimately one and the same occurrence, and must be thought as coexistent with the irrevocable past which grounds the thought of the sciences (such a recurrent cause and effect relations). Thus, temporally, we might conceive of any 'thing' or being is split through-and-through by a concrete past which endures in the passage of the present (in its typical usage) and a future that is the pure form of emergence that places all modes of enduring into indetermination, insofar as the event makes the past malleable. Here, we see Mead most emphatically engaging in

⁸¹ For example, David Bohm (2002) clearly appeals to the fact that the rupture caused by the development in quantum physics necessitates the sciences to take a new stance on creativity and the emergence of the new (p.258)

⁸² Mead (2002) p.35 & 52

⁸³ Ibid, p.42-3

the temporality of the novel without reduction, which is akin to the thought of Deleuze and Serres.

Finally, we must ask what are the consequences with regard to the self when Mead articulates such a sweeping analysis of time? To see how Mead's philosophy of emergence is implied in his vision of self, we must introduce one final concept drawn from this same text. The concept is *sociality*, which I believe has far reaching consequences beyond the social sphere. This is because Mead accords to the present (as emergence) a *social character*.⁸⁴ Social, in this instance, is taken in an extremely general form, insofar as it denotes "the capacity of being several things at once".⁸⁵ Sociality, then, is the properly paradoxical instance of being *in-between* two orders. In the case of time, it is the paradox of the present, being between both the determined sequence of discrete occurrences from which the present derives, and the unforeseen future which the present passes into. Beyond the temporal sphere however, this concept of sociality also applies much broader to the emergence of things such as the mind. As our initial presentation of Mead suggested, the mind is not something that is tactically assumed as simply given but must be conceived as a complex process of emergence that comes about through particular social conditions. It not only expresses a clear dependence on the prior organic order of what we might call 'materiality,' but simultaneously diverges in such a way that must be considered *natural yet unpredictable*.

Finally, we are in a position to adequately present the nature of the self, according to Mead, that corroborates his image of the present as emergence which, furthermore, coincides with the thought of Deleuze and Guattari on the dynamics of desire. It appears that the only way

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.73

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.75

to truly grasp Mead's understanding of the 'I' as a phase of the self is through its implicit temporal underpinning which is not sufficiently presented in his most notable works (which are not even his own writings) such as *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934). If we are to approach the 'I' through the *Philosophy of the Present*, we can see that it is itself a sociality, acting in-between the unconscious field of desire and the given social situation in which the 'me', its functional counterpart, finds itself situated. Mead's usage of terms such as spontaneity or creativity with regards to the action of the 'I' take on concrete meaning insofar as we understand that they do not appear simply out of nowhere, *but precisely from the nature of the 'I' being the continuous emergence of the self in nature*. The 'me' is thus the coagulation of occurrences which gives the appearance of a linear and enduring identity, which is constantly being constructed and reshaped by the action of the 'I'. In making the self a natural aspect of our social evolution, we see it expresses the same emergent temporality as *nature as a whole*.

Furthermore, the concept of sociality helps us to grasp the essential relation Mead posits between the individual and the other. There is not a mere dialectic between the self and other, but rather the self is paradoxically positioned in-between the individual and their social milieu. The self is at once more than the individual in their bodily existence, yet less than the symbolic medium it communicates with others through. This double tension is the mark of the self insofar as it necessitates both orders while being irreducible to either of them; the self merges with the order of the event.

With regards to the theory of desire in Deleuze and Guattari, the idea of sociality operates beautifully with their concept of a 'perceptual semiotics' which indeed seeks to "see things in the middle".⁸⁶ Perhaps, at a conceptual level, we could even suggest that the primordial sociality is

⁸⁶ Deleuze & Guattari (1987) p.23

the one at the center of all their works, that is, between the Virtual and the Actual.

Terminologically, it is true, Mead encapsulates emergence and sociality within the 'present', which is clearly circumvented in Deleuze's analysis in *The Logic of Sense*, as previously discussed. Nevertheless, Mead clearly uses it in the sense that Deleuze ascribes to the *becoming* of events, which penetrate state of affairs in a way that always introduces novelty. However, unlike Deleuze, Mead is clearly more focused on the concrete actualization of events, rather than their status as 'ideal events'. This difference can be attributed to their overall focus, where Deleuze is aiming at an understanding of the conditions of emergence along with the attempt to think *different potential emergences* that coincide with it, whereas Mead is concerned less with the event's metaphysical status than its concrete role in shaping our experience. Nonetheless, all this is to say that, the convergence of Mead with Deleuze and Guattari can only truly take place under the premise of their thoughts on creativity which foregrounds all other conceptual developments.

Concluding remarks:

Before moving on to our practical analysis of contemporary selfhood in relation to the celebrity figure, we ought to recapitulate the central points that made it necessary for us to present this novel synthesis between the thought of Mead and Deleuze. With Mead, we saw the departure from a dualist model of the mind and body which has been sedimented into the way we interpret the self. Instead of seeing the mind or self as separate from the body or nature, Mead places the self *within* the natural evolution of the human individual *in* society. Insofar as the capacity to reflect upon ourselves is mediated through the encounter with the generalized other,

human beings are capable to engage with each other at a symbolic level, providing the basis for what we might call 'intelligent communication'.

However, at the limit of development of self, we encounter a problem: the two phases of the self, the 'I' and the 'me', are given asymmetrical explanations. Indeed, much of the time Mead is talking about the self, it corresponds to our reflexive grasp, and thereby only the 'me' aspect. This is not to say the 'I' is unimportant to Mead, but the relative weight of its function seems to lack sufficient description.

With the help of Deleuze and Guattari, we sought to give further clarity and explore the very radical nature of the 'I', by linking it to the pre-reflexive field of desire. This conjunction has two consequences: first, the 'I' is no longer harmonious as a transcendental ego, but is instead a *multiplicity* of intensive forces and drives, denoting the differential field of the unconscious. Secondly, we can accord the creativity of the 'I' that Mead recognizes, not to the subject as such, but to the very flux of desire as it flows through nature. Thus, not only do we provide Mead with a further grounding for the concept of self, but furthermore we remain true to the very becoming of nature itself which is central to both of these thinkers.

In our last segment, we reconsidered some of Mead's work not explicitly tied to works on the self, to uncover critical thoughts on time that reflect a novel perspective on how we can interpret his approach to the self. It could be said that in rereading Mead's perspective on the self from the point of view of emergence offers the greatest insight into the function of the 'I' and the potential for creativity, which we align with the flux of desire in Deleuze and Guattari. The purpose of this segment was not simply to undermine the initial analysis which disclosed the central features of the theory of self, but rather demonstrates the temporal presuppositions of emergence that get little attention in typical readings of Mead. This point most emphatically ties

Mead with the premise of our first chapter as well, particularly on Serres call for the sciences to think chaos or the event.

Now that we have established a clear link between desire and the self, we can move to a practical examination of desire at work in the social. For, all that has been said thus far has been done so with the aim of according to it a novel practical utility within Social Theory.

Considering the complex nature of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of desire along with Mead's theory of sociality, it will further serve to give clarity to the endless supply of analytic tools they provide.

Chapter 3

Self and the Other: The Celebrity Figure

In this final chapter, we reach the apex of our analysis. In the previous two chapters, we sought to understand the nature of the chaos we find not only in our social world, but in every fissure of daily life. This became particularly apparent, in the second chapter, when we looked at desire and its appearance in a multiplicity of coexisting drives. That being said, chaos is not without its own antagonism in actuality. We equally find ourselves in various arrangements – some rigid, others dynamic, such as the self, which attempt to ward off the chaotic flow of nature. The goal of the previous segments was to illustrate the middle-ground *within the self*: the self not only as a modality of organization critical to our social world, but simultaneously the point of entry for chaos to flow through our lived experiences. This result came as the synthesis between Deleuze and Guattari along with George Herbert Mead, with their theories of Desire and Selfhood.

However, now we would like to shift our attention away from the various theoretical perspectives we have looked at, to look at our contemporary social world. In doing so, we will engage with a very timely problematic: the celebrity idol. While neither Deleuze nor Mead speak directly on this phenomenon, they nevertheless provide insightful mediation as to how we might conceptualize it ourselves. As indicated by the title of this thesis, two critical components have become particularly relevant in our previous digression: desire and the self. However, the utility of such concepts now becomes entirely contingent on the current state of affairs in which our analysis will unfold. The purpose of this chapter will thus be to solidify the previous theoretical considerations while at the same time extending their utility to practical analyses.

The world we live in today is vastly different from the times of both Mead and Deleuze. Not only has the socio-political sphere radically changed, but most importantly the very ways by which we understand our selves and those around us. Clearly, one of the most pertinent factors contributing to this shift is the rapid advancements of personalized (handheld) technologies, allowing almost immediate access to information and different social milieu's from anywhere in the world. This technological realm denotes the contemporary surface where much of our lives (and most likely future lives) unfold.⁸⁷ To use the conceptual language founded in the previous chapter, we might say that the sociality of the self has expanded into a new order. There are various areas of sociological importance with respect to technological advancements, however only one in particular will be considered for the sake of specificity and clarity of this work: the *celebrity figure*. It is in my view that this specific relation, between desire and a celebrity idol, constitutes one of the fundamental vectors of self-development, along with the means by which our desires are arranged into particular assemblages.

However, if we are to grasp the *power* of the celebrity figure in our contemporary era, we must first begin with the question of how this relationship developed. To do so, we will start with an analysis of Rosa's view of late Modernity, which we remain very much embedded within.⁸⁸ Yet, while Rosa presents a compelling theory of the cultural tendencies of Modernity as a whole, we must narrow in even further to the particular *regime* – that is, the neoliberal regime – which has had the most profound impact on the relationship between our self and desire.⁸⁹ Having done

⁸⁷ Lyotard (1991) *The Inhuman*, p.64

⁸⁸ Rosa (2015) *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*.

⁸⁹ Han (2017) *PsychoPolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*.

so, we will begin to uncover the basic infrastructure that has contributed to the rise of a novel dynamic between the masses and celebrity figures.

But how will we conceptualize this primary figure of analysis – the celebrity figure – in regard to its contemporary manifestation? Here, I would like to engage creatively with our current social world we are all familiar with, in tandem with the critique of idols that began with such incredible force in the work of Nietzsche. For Nietzsche appears to be the first to explicitly recognize the critical link between idols, as presented by the *priest* figure, with our *moral* modes of existence.⁹⁰ Yet, the power of such a bond is made on two contrary paths: not only is such a mode of idolization a necessary feature of our social organization, contributing to our very distinction from any other living being (a thesis aligned with Mead’s concept of the generalized other), but also, the particular contents of such a relation is responsible for our critical ineptitude, where our moral system propagates a *ressentiment against life itself*.⁹¹ Translating this into its basic form, we will see that the celebrity figure, more than ever, has become a *primary vector* of our desires and mode of selfhood. It is here that we will return to one of the primary motivational forces behind Deleuze and Guattari’s interest in reconceptualizing desire: “Why do men fight *for* their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation”?⁹² For, if the energy of desire is truly the force underlying the production of the real, then what is more crucial for us to recognize is the fact that it is responsible (in the process of consolidating) for not only the most revolutionary ideas, but also the most repressive (such as in the case of Fascism).⁹³ In our case, we will then be asking the following question: is our idolization of celebrity figures an investment of desire that serves to empower us, or to the contrary, does it reinforce the structural

⁹⁰ Nietzsche (2013) *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.21

⁹² Deleuze & Guattari (1972) p.29 – following Spinoza and Reich

⁹³ *Ibid*

exploitation of the masses? What Deleuze calls the *right* to desire critically confronts us with the necessity of engaging ethically with the flow of investment into the social sphere, considering how they impact us insofar as they mark the virtual unfolding of reality itself.⁹⁴

Our analysis will thus unfold in three parts: firstly, we will observe the general state of Modernity all the way to its ‘late’ manifestation of Neoliberalism. Secondly, we will observe the emergence of the celebrity idol, beginning with Nietzsche, followed by Weber on charismatic authority, to its more current mode with Edward Bernays and its relation to the self. Lastly, we will consider the Ethics of such a relation, whereby we will seek to make a distinction between positive investments into celebrity idols, in contrast to negative ones.

The cultural tendency of late Modernity

There have been many takes on the status of Modernity, which can be seen in a variety of works from Lyotard’s work on *Post-Modernity* to Latour’s idea that we have *never even been* Modern.⁹⁵ However, such debates are rather futile when we are merely seeking to identify the broad cultural tendencies of Modernity that have precipitated until today. What Hartmut Rosa has acutely provided in several books is the more general or molar tendencies that emerged in what we have retrospectively called “modernity” that have lasted through to our contemporary state of society. Most profoundly is his suggestion that modern society has subsisted through its particular modality of change, as he tells us:

“A modern society (...) is one that can stabilize itself only dynamically, in other words one that requires constant economic growth, technological

⁹⁴ Deleuze & Parnet (2002) p.110

⁹⁵ Lyotard (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*; Latour (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*.

*acceleration, and cultural innovation in order to maintain its institutional status quo.*⁹⁶

Thus, what defines modernity is precisely its capacity for *dynamic stabilization*, meaning its very coherence is contingent upon it being able to constantly change, produce or “accelerate” as he puts it.⁹⁷ It seems to me that this is a very powerful image not only of Modern society, but even more specifically contemporary society. Especially in the realm of technological production, it is easy to fall behind and not keep up with the latest trending app or device that *everyone is using*. With the release of *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and other instant messaging mediums, one falls very quickly out of touch with what is going on in society.

Yet, the dynamic stabilization is not the *cause*, but rather the *effect* of the cultural tendency of modernity: that is, the desire for *control*.⁹⁸ It is the desire to bring under control that which is at first uncontrollable that underlies the dynamic stabilization, animating the very movement of Modernity. This idea is reciprocated by Deleuze and Guattari in its dynamics, insofar we understand what they mean when they insist desire is *machinic*. They define a machine as “a *system of interruptions or breaks (coupures)*” – in short, the constant halting and redirecting of a flow.⁹⁹ For example, we can see the shift in communication mediums from letters, to email, to instant text-messaging as an *increasing control* over the parameters of distanced contact. Each one of these mediums is an interruption of a flow – a flow of communication – that branches and thereby propagating the flow in a different direction. Furthermore, the flow of one medium, such as that of letters, is or can be redirected into a different, more convenient flow, such as that of text messaging. The addition ‘convenience’ of

⁹⁶ Rosa, (2020) *The Uncontrollability of the World*, p.9

⁹⁷ Rosa, (2013) *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*.

⁹⁸ Rosa, (2015) p.427 & (2020) p.2

⁹⁹ Deleuze & Guattari, (1972) p.36

these novel flows is derived from their supposed decreased susceptibility to chaos (letters being lost or stolen; for example), while also decreasing the temporal distance (acceleration of communicability). We can even interpret the post-structuralist movement (including Deleuze and Guattari) and its central focus on the amorphous field of power or desire as an attempt to bring the uncontrollable under control. This is particularly evident in the general tendency of continental philosophy away from the actuality of the way things are to grasping the underlying ‘unconscious’ or virtual tendencies which we have already observed. In a very radical sense, the tendency to bring things under control can be seen as one of the fundamental movements of all human life, and has contributed significantly to our own evolution.¹⁰⁰

The problem, pertaining specifically to late Modernity, is the fact that despite this central tendency which appears to give us great comfort with regards to our being-in-the-world, is the fact that reality continuously pushes back with increasing uncontrollability. As we saw with distanced communication, sending an email is much more controllable and convenient than sending a letter, but simultaneously we are confronted with email inboxes filled with the novel chaos of advertisements, group emails, or even scams. But, perhaps one of the most profound examples of such a disjunction can be seen in empirical studies demonstrating how less ‘free-play’ time in schools (such as recess) is correlated to worse teacher ratings of classroom behaviour.¹⁰¹ The attempt to bring recess under control, the most uncontrollable aspect of the school day, inversely leads to greater uncontrollability in segments of the day teacher require control for learning purposes. This paradox was clearly articulated at the very beginning of this paper, with regards to the socio-political sphere and the sciences confronting chaos. The

¹⁰⁰ Rosa, (2020) p.12-13; & Deleuze & Guattari, (1987) p.40

¹⁰¹ Barrows, Silver, & Stein. (2009) *School Recess and Group Classroom Behaviour*.

empirical sciences represent one of mankind's greatest leaps in the attempt to control and quantify nature – but nevertheless, our position in the world only become more obscure.¹⁰²

However, we must ask, what is *late* modernity's response to this continuous confrontation with chaos? It appears to me that the neoliberal regime derives its power from its attempt to confront the uncontrollability of the social world. The neoliberal emphasis on individual liberty denotes a critical point of tension, whereby a redistribution of power seems to be taking place, when in actuality we see a radicalization of inequalities.¹⁰³ With the increasing pressure placed upon the self as the fulcrum of social responsibility, neoliberal ideals directly contribute to the *intensification of our daily lives*. It is within this context that we slowly get closer to the central problematic of the celebrity figure. As selves – that which we most clearly *are* – our bond to the social sphere is inescapable. Thus, when the rhythm of society begins to increase, so too does our experience of ourselves and more implicitly the becoming's we engage in. It is within the intensification of the social sphere we find both the power and centrality of idols in securing our passage into this novel terrain.

The purpose of beginning our analysis with Rosa's paradox of control in Modernity is to illuminate the very tangible problematic that is visible in all spheres of life. The force of Rosa's argument, it seems to me, resides in our direct experience of the tension between order and chaos that is becoming *increasing intense*. However, we are seeking to specify this intensification through its intrinsic link with the self. In fact, we had already began to look at this domain with regards to the relationship between desire and the self. The self arises as a mode of self-control

¹⁰² As Guattari notes in *Chaosophy*: "The development of positive sciences has a Christian motor" (p.49) which seems to illustrate the affinity between two different regimes of control.

¹⁰³ Mouffe (2018) *For A Left Populism*, p.31

that is inherent in the envelopment of the generalized-other.¹⁰⁴ By the same token, we noticed that the structure of the self never fully envelops the virtual potentiality of desire: we are constantly exploring the multiplicity of drives that contribute to the incessant creativity of what we can do. We realize only retrospectively that changes have been going on behind our back, and that we have become entirely different individuals than we could have every expected. We see that desire gets funneled into particular arrangements – some of them are of our own making, others far beyond our grasp – but nevertheless, this unavoidable force unremittingly proceeds by breaking down and building things up. The problem we did not face in previous chapters at theoretical level is the increasing intensity of our experience in the contemporary world, which we must retain during our following analysis.

If we look at Rosa's argument from the perspective of the intensity of our experiences, it is clear that he sees the problem of modernity as essential a problem of *energy* or desire in its most general form.¹⁰⁵ But, how can we evaluate the assemblages in which desire gets collected and consolidated, particularly in our social world? In our analysis of Deleuze and Guattari, we saw that desire, as an immanent force that expresses the very becoming of the world, distinguishes neither between "good" nor "bad", but is the continuous striving of pure creativity (difference). From a practical standpoint, we cannot realistically observe all of our libidinal investments. However, what we can do is look at *a particular investment, such as that of the celebrity figure, that is transversally intermeshed with the political, ecological, and psychical spheres of life, and follow the different lines of flight – those that are considered both good and bad – to where they lead us.* This is exactly what we will proceed to do in the following segment:

¹⁰⁴ Mead (1925) p.190-191

¹⁰⁵ Rosa (2015) p.425-427

starting from a very broad lens, as we already have done so here, we will follow the lines of resonance that first place us in a dynamic relationship with a given celebrity figure.

The contemporary Emergence of the celebrity figure

A celebrity idol, or more generally a figure of authority, taken in the most wide-ranging sense as an individual many others conduct their behaviour *around*, is not by any means a recent social phenomenon.¹⁰⁶ Rather than presenting the long history of the idol figure, however, we will be observing most acutely its emergence beginning with the work of Nietzsche, then Weber followed by that of Edward Bernays. While Nietzsche appears to be an odd place to begin an investigation into the concrete encounter with celebrity idols, we must remember the central endeavour that flows throughout his many works: a critique of our *moral* system of values. In his genealogical investigations, he traces the development of these system of values which, in brief, delimit the basis for what we consider to be ‘good’ and ‘bad’.¹⁰⁷ Of course, there is a historical component to the system of values, however, Nietzsche also places a significant emphasis on a particular figure – the priest – in the distribution and maintenance of such beliefs. As he says in *The Genealogy of Morals*:

“The priest’s...dominion is over the suffering... His importance, his value, lies precisely in his peculiar ability to discharge this dynamite

¹⁰⁶ Weber (2019) p.338

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche (2017) *The Will to Power: Selection from the Notebooks of the 1880s*, chapter 1-2; Nietzsche (2013)

[*resentment*] in such a way that the explosion is rendered harmless to the flock or the shepherd...”¹⁰⁸

We are focusing here, on the particular modality of the relationship between the priest and the masses. The priest, like many other social roles, exhibits a peculiar power with regards to those around them. Such a power is used precisely in the construction of a *reality for the masses* that at once maintains the prominence of the priest while *seeming* beneficial for those that accentuate such a belief. As we will see shortly, this perspective on the priest resonates to a great extent with the thought of Weber on charismatic authority. Before we get there, however, we must ask why does Nietzsche make such an emphasis on the priestly figure? We have already mentioned their relation to the establishment of system of values, but equally as important is the maintenance of such values. For, what the previous quote already indicates is the fact that the very *authority* of the priest hinges on the weakness, or resentment of the masses. To do so requires not only the fostering of the nihilistic attitude, but furthermore the legitimization of *idols* which are mediated through the priestly figure.¹⁰⁹

But this quote further points us in another, more obscure direction, for Nietzsche also mentions the release of an explosive energy that resides within the masses. It seems to me this directs us to our libidinal investments with regards to our sense of control. The priest, along with the belief in God provides an immense relief to those confronted with the radical uncontrollability of the world. Prior to the firm grounding of empirical scientific research, the world must have indeed seemed unsettling without any grounding force. In this respect, we cannot deny the importance of the belief of a higher power in the mediation of our relationship to the world. The problem then becomes one of whether or not such a belief is warranted when it

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.112-113

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche (1990) *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, p.31, 39, & 64

comes in resistance with the development of new world views such as those hinging on scientific development.

What Nietzsche quite uniquely recognizes is that priests themselves are not at the top of the hierarchy of authority: rather, they are the arbiters between the masses and the true idol, God. Yet due to the simple fact that such an idol is accessible to a select few, the apex of authority is transfused through the tangible authority of the priest. Here, we get to the center of Nietzsche's concern with the mode of authority that substantiates the priest's power over the masses: it hinges on the creation of a belief – a belief's who's authority is legitimized purely on its historical propagation and the desire for control.

We can gain further insight into this mode of authority through a brief glance at the work of Weber on the ideal types of rule. These modes of authority are 1) rational-legal, 2) tradition and 3) charismatic.¹¹⁰ It must be noted that for Weber, this categorization does not preclude their mixing in actuality, since this delimitation is more for conceptual practicality; hence the 'ideal' in ideal-types.¹¹¹ It is clear that with the priestly figure we see a mixture of these types of authority, however, I would like to limit this analysis to the *charismatic type*. This is not only because Weber directly draws our attention to "priestly charisma", but furthermore accentuates in great lucidity the relationship between ruler and ruled that will be critical for the analysis to come.¹¹²

Weber defines charisma as "the personal quality that makes an individual seem extraordinary... or at least exceptional powers or properties are attributed to the individual:

¹¹⁰ Weber (2019) p.341-342

¹¹¹ Ibid, p.342

¹¹² Ibid, p.382

powers or properties that are not found in everyone... rendering that individual a 'leader'".¹¹³ It matters little whether or not such a virtuous character is claimed to be a gift from above, or simply demonstrated in ones actions, for what truly *legitimizes* such a mode of authority is *the belief* held by those ruled over.¹¹⁴ This points us to a particular vulnerability on the side of those being ruled over, insofar the dividing line between truth and semblance takes on a particularly malleable quality. This can be clearly seen in the case of the religious authority of the priest, insofar as the grounds of their rule rests on the belief in a god through which they mediate the masses relationship to. No doubt there is the intermixing of *traditional* authority here as well, but as Weber points out, it is the *routinization* of charismatic authority through the process of ritual, that legitimizes such a rule.¹¹⁵ If the belief in such a routine should fail to provide the guise of authority onto the priest, the legitimacy of such a system of authority would be absolved.

It becomes clear then, from a brief glance at both Nietzsche and Weber, that modes of authority such as that of the priest can exert an extremely powerful influence on an obscure basis. The relationship between authority and its grounding is our specific concern here, as the inconspicuousness of the legitimacy of our contemporary vectors of authority comes to the fore. We must be prepared to asked questions that seemingly go unnoticed in our daily lives, yet perhaps should not insofar as they have profound consequences for our very agency. For example, how is it that, still to this day, various figures of authority are legitimated despite the clear destructive tendencies they foster?

¹¹³ Ibid, p.374

¹¹⁴ ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.382

Before we can answer such a question, we still require some historical background that provides the foothold for the symbiotic relationship between the celebrity figure and the masses as we see it today. With regard to contemporary celebrity idols, *which are no longer priests but ‘influencers’*, there is no better works to consider than that of Edward Bernays – a figure whose impact on the structure of our consumption society has for the most part been forgotten.

The relevance of Bernays work is derived from a close bond the psychoanalytic tradition, most acutely with regards to the unconscious field of desire and its relationship to consumer habits.¹¹⁶ What drive his investigations, and is clear in various works of his, is the movement of the masses: can *propaganda* be used beyond the fields of wartime, to the daily regimentation of the public?¹¹⁷ We must pay very close attention here to Bernays use of the term ‘propaganda’ since it acquires, it seems to me, a very novel and radical sense that goes beyond its normative understanding. Propaganda does not simply denote a tool of a higher political authority that can be used in times of urgency, but rather a social psychological phenomenon that is constantly shaping our daily lives. Bernays describes “Modern propaganda” as the “consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group”.¹¹⁸ In short, propaganda is generalized to its maximal degree, transubstantiating the basis of our social world from individuals into malleable and quantifiable cogs. This is expanded upon by Bernays with regards to its political – or more specifically, its *democratic* – implications:

“Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an *invisible government* which is the *true ruling power of our country* [America]. We are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our

¹¹⁶ Bernays (2019) *Crystalizing Public Opinion*.

¹¹⁷ Bernays (1955) *Propaganda*, p.55

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.52

ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. *This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized.*"¹¹⁹

It is here that we reach the apex of the situation. Bernays is of course, working at the beginning of the 20th century, and while the brilliance of his work is undeniable, this should not occlude its malevolent nature. Already, we should see a blatant contradiction Bernays attributes to democracy, insofar as the ruling powers become the invisible architects of our unconscious desires. This goes against what Mouffe calls the two 'pillars of democracy': popular sovereignty and the equality of all people.¹²⁰ If Bernays is correct in his assessment, however, then we must consider that 'democracy' is but an insipid smoke screen that provides the illusion of freedom, contributing to the consolidation of power in a continuously exploitative manner, much like any other political system.¹²¹ The reality is that we propagate thoughts, opinions and preference *all the time*. If this was not the case, our social world would have no consistency whatsoever.

This problem is further confounded when we consider the basic ideals of Neoliberal capitalism. The basic tenant of Neoliberalism is *individual liberty*, which expresses itself clearly in mass consumerism which feeds off the centrality of 'me' in our state of affairs.¹²² Do you want to become a millionaire? All you have to do is put *your* mind to it, and *you* can achieve anything. Are you struggling with addiction or substance abuse? Only *you* can get yourself out of it, because *you* got yourself here in the first place. This form of responsabilization which falls directly on the individual is the central consequence of the Neoliberal regime. Already, we have posited a link between this political infatuation with the self and the intensification of experience

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.37

¹²⁰ Mouffe (2022) *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, p.2

¹²¹ A thesis clearly presented by Byung-Chul Han in *PsychoPolitics* (2017)

¹²² Mouffe (2018) p.18 & 31

we experience in our daily lives. It is no coincidence that the prominence of Bernays marketing strategy aligns so well with the political philosophy of late Modernity.

It seems that Bernays himself recognizes this, despite the fact that his entire justification for what he calls the “public relations counsel” runs counter to it: “The voice of the people expresses the mind of the people, and that mind is made up for it by the group leaders in whom it believes and by those persons who understand the manipulation of public opinion”.¹²³ In short, what Bernays seems to be suggesting is that yes, we are free agents capable of expressing ourselves – his Neoliberal argument – while simultaneously, the content that delimits the possibilities of action is entirely circumscribed by an ‘intelligent few’ – his Oligarchical argument. It then becomes all the more clear as to why the Neoliberal regime has been so successful, in particular for consumer capitalism and financially based politics: it maintains the same contradiction that runs throughout Bernays socio-political work.

It is here that our extensive considerations of Mead become particularly relevant, insofar as the self becomes the foci of social responsibility in neoliberal capitalism. Based on our previous analysis, can we not see that Bernays investigation hinges on the *sociality of the self* that is neither purely individualistic nor entirely socially determined? If we are to take the conclusion of our second chapter seriously, we must understand that the dynamic relationship between self and other is by no means a clear or linear dialogue. Rather, the self is constituted within a system that stems far beyond our own creation and likewise coincides considerably with the given milieu we are brought up in. A point that all thinkers brought up throughout this paper can agree on is the fact that certain nodal points in such a system – be it parents as articulated in the psychoanalytic tradition or the more expansive view from Nietzsche to Mead that denotes the

¹²³ Bernays (1955) p.109

significance of various social ‘roles’ – play a critical part into the shaping of behaviours and thus our very selves. For the sake of keeping our argument concise, we are limiting ourselves to just the relationship between ourselves and the celebrity figure, which is a particular node in our contemporary social system that has gained increasing prominence and thereby cause for concern.

Desire’s investment into Propagation Vectors; Ethical Considerations

This brings us unequivocally within the realm of the celebrity figure. For, if there is one thing that Bernays sees as central to the propagation of a particular belief or system is precisely through a *leader*, “*key people*” or “*influential public men*”.¹²⁴ While Bernays speaks most frequently of the powerful ‘invisible government’, we will be arguing in a less abstract manner that such people are inextricably link to the celebrity figure, in the way corporate conglomerates utilize them to their benefit through sponsorships and product placements. We might summarily present the celebrity figure from its paradoxical positioning in relation to the masses: the celebrity figure is an outsider, a *stranger* in a similar sense to that of Simmel’s beautiful articulation, while simultaneously being a central node in the generalized other.¹²⁵ In short, the celebrity figure is at once at the limit of society, and at its center. It is these contrary yet interdependent attributes of the celebrity figure that are indispensable for our analysis.

Firstly, we consider the celebrity figure to be an outsider insofar as they manifest a profoundly evental character; they hold a particular relationship to novelties. This attribute is significant insofar as it grasps the very conditions of the idol’s emergence. If we picture society

¹²⁴ Bernays (1955) p.61, 73 & 78

¹²⁵ Simmel (1908) *The Stranger*; in (1971) *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, p.143-149

as a sphere, we would see social institutions and normative behaviour at the center keeping the chaos of the outside at bay. But at the limit, we find the “*anomalous*” who experiment and bring change back to the comfort of the inner circle.¹²⁶ Chaos, creativity and the true becoming of society reside at the limit, and it is here the true celebrity figure draws their power and difference. This, however, does not necessitate that such novelties will be recognized, nor does it guarantee the safe passage of the experimentalist back home. Hence why the title stranger is so fitting: “as such, the stranger is near and far *at the same time*”.¹²⁷ It is this ‘nearness’ we must now turn our attention to.

The celebrity figure clearly cannot be subsumed purely under the first attribute of creativity. For, while it is true the idol is responsible for pushing the social in unforeseeable directions, we must also recognize the celebrity figure’s role in the *maintenance* of the very flow of social life. I will use the term *propagation vector* to highlight what these individual actually *do*. With any celebrity figure, be it a musician, and author, or a politician, there is an underlying necessity to *propagate* something: a genre of music, a style of writing, or a political ideology; in short, a mode of being. This is equally true for Trump as the propagation vector of a new modality of political thought, as it is for Freud, the propagation vector of a new way of thinking about desire and the mind. Here, the idol returns from the chaos of the limits to share the novelties they have confronted with the hopes of sharing a new way of experiencing the world. This is where the idol connects with the public, providing an ease of mind for those who find comfort in the solidarity of others.

What also should be clear from these two attributes is that any form of idolization essentially involves an *asymmetry*. What is important is not necessarily the two extremes of ruler and ruled,

¹²⁶ See Deleuze & Guattari (1987) p.246

¹²⁷ Simmel (1908) p.148

but what Weber accentuates at every turn, being the *belief in legitimacy* that passes in between the two.¹²⁸ Not only must there be a propagation vector that introduces and symbolizes a particular mode of existence, but such a mode must be propagated throughout society to be substantiated. The only way for such an asymmetry to be legitimized is through our very attenuation to events. With every event, there will be both those who accentuate and seek to consolidate the legitimacy of such creations, and those who resist and attempt to undermine their force. As such, neither side is inherently right or wrong, in the same way not every technological advance is inherently beneficial.

In fact, the essential difference between the two is *energetic* in the sense of desire: the individual who resides at the limits of society demonstrates a profound resistance to the opinions and norms of their trade. Not only this, but the manner in which they invest desire is entirely creative and offers no guarantee of success. This lack of guarantee can be seen in the fact that the individual is forcing the boundaries of *what could be* considered normative in the future, so long as this boundary is not stressed too far. In the realm of music, for example, the emergence of electronic synthesizers marks a profound shift in the way we conceptualize music. Some might hardly consider anything that's been produced in this fashion to even be 'music', while at the same time for younger generations there is a profound resonance with the style. In contrast to the investments made by creators, the psychological load placed on the masses is one typically of a binary sort: you either support a mode of being or you do not. The decision does not even have to be cognitively explicit. You either listen to and enjoy electronic music, or you don't. The lines of desire follow actual and already consolidated paths, whereas the creator explores and produces within the virtual itself.

¹²⁸ Weber (2019) p.339

It should not be thought, then, that this asymmetry between the propagation vector and *propagators* (the people) is essentially exploitative. While it may be hard to justify many of the points Bernays claims as to the role of propaganda in society, it would be ignorant to suggest that society could function without it, hence the title of the first chapter: “*Organizing Chaos*”.¹²⁹ Just as we saw with the concept of the self, its practical utility was derived from its capacity to *organize* the heterogeneous reality of the competing drives. Analogically, we can think of the celebrity figure as a relay, in the same way that the *thalamus* in the brain mediates incoming sensory information before its distribution across the brain.¹³⁰ Without these grounding points in the social order, our capacity to function within society becomes vacuous, as is the case with the *schizophrenic*. This point is further affirmed in a very basic approach to language since the specific duration of any language is entirely contingent on its propagation through time while not strictly ‘belonging’ to any one individual. Nevertheless, languages are pervaded by constant transformations; whether it is the introduction of a new word, a decreased use in another, this ebb and flow of a particular style of language can be modified by certain key vectors such as an author, politician, or content creator.

In the same way we conceptualized desire on a continuum, containing both fascicular desire as well as revolutionary desire, as well as time being between the two abstract poles of the Actual and the Virtual, we must say the same for idols and the vectors that contribute to its capacity to endure. Hence, our analysis necessarily entails an *Ethics* which pertains to particular modes of propagation as well as emergent figures found in contemporary society. To do so, we

¹²⁹ Bernays (1955) Chapter 1

¹³⁰ Hwang, Bertolero, Liu & D’Esposito (2017) *The Human Thalamus Is an Integrative Hub for Functional Brain Networks*.

must return again to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, which can be read, as Foucault suggests in the preface, as "a book of ethics".¹³¹

The problematic Deleuze and Guattari establish in this book is precisely to confront a particular propagation vector: the psychoanalyst. This might appear to be a curious target for a seemingly well established domain of study and clinical practice, which seems to have the aim of helping individuals with problems of the psyche. Yet, we must not confuse the act of propagation with *what* is being propagated and *how* it is done. As we have already seen, propagation is an inevitable phenomenon that is fundamental to the organization of society or any system, yet *what and how* it is propagated can be subjected to ethical scrutiny. This is exactly what they do with psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic practice, at the time of their writing, disseminated a very particular understanding and structure of the unconscious and desire that was essentially *Oedipal*.¹³² Without going into too much detail as to the theoretical basis of such a complex, we can summarily say that (1) desire and the unconscious are bound in a negative-repressive state, (2) the psychoanalyst becomes the sole individual capable of interpreting fantasies, and (3) the process itself finds no finality or 'cure'.¹³³ For this reason, Deleuze and Guattari constantly draw parallels between the psychoanalyst and the priest: in both cases, these propagation vectors possess immense power mediating the actions of the masses which "teaches *infinite resignation*".¹³⁴ Rather than opening the individual onto novel paths and exploring their

¹³¹ Foucault (1972) preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, xiii

¹³² Ibid, p.51

¹³³ Deleuze & Parnet (2002) p.57-92

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.60; this is followed by a prompt warning: "... they are the last priests (no, *there will be others after them*)."

unconscious productive capacities, which is the basic aim of *schizoanalysis*, the individual is indoctrinated into desiring their own repression.

Nevertheless, we must also recognize that Deleuze and Guattari's standpoint essentially stands on the basis of the eventual character of psychoanalysis' discovery of the unconscious and desire, much like this very thesis. In spite of their many criticisms of him, Freud opened up a truly revolutionary way of understanding the psyche of not only the neurotic, but the everyday individual.¹³⁵ It is true they recognize this, albeit seldomly, however we can see how nuanced their critic becomes under this tension.¹³⁶

Returning to the dominant propagation vector of today, ranging from the title's 'creator' to 'influencer', we can immediately see many parallels with the structure that is being propagated through the figures of the priest or psychoanalyst. However, to do so we must first clearly establish what these figures are propagating. Bernays is absolutely correct to suggest that it is big business that is one of the first domains to truly take hold of the possibilities of propaganda, to the extent of dwarfing the action of the politician.¹³⁷ It seems to me that this fact, in conjunction with consumer society and the particular content of propagation of celebrity figures is central to the contemporary regime of resignation. This resignation is vacuolized completely on the creation of a *lack*. Following Deleuze and Guattari, we must see that

“Lack (*manque*) is created, planned, and organized in and through social production. [...] The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the *art of a dominant class*”.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Freud (1953) *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, p.296

¹³⁶ Deleuze (1995) p.15

¹³⁷ Bernays (1955) p.91 & 110

¹³⁸ Deleuze & Guattari (1972) p.28

Thus, rather than exploring our own potentialities through established connections with particular vectors, the unconscious resignation to a belief in fulfillment is derived from the acquisition of objects. In the same way that Deleuze and Guattari critique the psychoanalytic paradigm for propagating the capitalist structure, we can say the exact same thing for the dominant celebrity idol.¹³⁹

The situation as it has been present, appears bleak at best. What are we to do when every medium of social communication, which have become integral to our daily functioning and relationships, are simultaneously embedded with an almost infinite repertoire of celebrity figures set to consolidate our desires into a repressive formation? Furthermore, the development and use of Artificial Intelligence in these application only strengthens our capacity to get entrenched in vectors based on our subconscious attention mechanisms.¹⁴⁰ It is true, up until this point, we have left the title ‘celebrity idol’ very vague and broad in its application. If we use the example of Deleuze being taken as a celebrity figure, this would no doubt be true in some philosophic circles, yet such a case would be restricted to quite a limited population. The dominant idols of our times are of a new kind: they are ‘content creators’ or ‘influencers’ that have amassed massive followers through various apps such as Instagram to TikTok. It is no coincidence that these two labels parallel the attributes of celebrity figures we have already discussed; they are at once creators and propagators of some mode of being, *influencing* the behaviours of others.

The reality of the situation we are beginning to uncover is the fact that there is a particular modality of the relationship between the self and events that has been consolidating over the past century that is beginning to have serious consequences on the functioning of our lives. It is a basic psychological fact that we are drawn toward novelties and stimulation within

¹³⁹ Ibid, p.50

¹⁴⁰ Montag, Yang, & Elhai (2021) *On the Psychology of TikTok Use: A First Glimpse from Empirical Findings*.

our environment – a critical tendency we could not survive without.¹⁴¹ However, we appear to have reached a critical threshold whereby the dividing line between a critical event and a mere app notification begin to blur. From trademark text chimes to breaking news alerts, our openness to a world of unforeseeable possibilities is progressively being taken over by companies and celebrity figures trying to grasp our attention, regardless of the legitimacy of their claim.¹⁴² The idol appears in the midst of this chaos as a way out of the sheer intensity of events that surround us. Who better to trust than the individual who has thousands of trusted followers, seemingly *proving* their legitimacy? The legitimacy of our culture of idolization is grounded not only on the clear accumulation of likes and followers however, for what is equally as important is the systemic intensification of our daily live that conditions our very dependence on the idols in the first place. Thus, to the question of how we are to negotiate such a complex experience that constantly changes from one moment to the next, we can answer simply: through the opinion of idols.

It is at this point we must consider the ethics of our relationship to the vast realm of idols that populate our social world. If our ethical considerations are to have any impact, we must consider two points that relate to the status of any propagation vector. To begin, we must ask what the source of the asymmetry is between them and others? We have of course already hinted at the answer to this with the first attribute of creativity and novelty. Yet the problem with novelty is that it can be falsified. For example, if this distribution has come as a result of an enduring system of oppression – that is, the historical perpetuation of capital (as is in the case of Trump)? Or, conversely, does the asymmetry emerge through a truly *creative event*, a singular

¹⁴¹ Curado, Melgar, & Nobre (2021) *External Stimuli on Neural Networks: Analytical and Numerical Approaches*.

¹⁴² Benkler, Faris, & Roberts (2018) *Network Propaganda*, p.351-352

moment that introduces novel pathways into the human adventure? It seems to me, in this latter case we see figures such as authors, artist or athletes who are less concerned with the acquisition and propagation of capital, than they are with introducing true novelty into the world. Deleuze is obviously a propagation vector, with a unique philosophic power that has endured right until this very text. But how did he achieve such a prominent position? Was it not through the creative force of his work that allows us to see the world in a completely different manner? Inversely, did not Trump emerge through an asymmetry in power that tipped the scales in his favour even prior to accomplishing anything (family wealth)?

The difference between these two modalities of asymmetry is critical for our own reflexive engagement with idols in our daily life. It seems to me that there is a fundamental difference of nature between the idol that emerges on the basis of an event, than one whom emerges in any other fashion, particularly with regard to wealth. Take, for example, the creative determination that goes into the work of artist such as Cézanne. It is Maurice Merleau-Ponty who notes the truly evental character of his style:

“Cézanne did not think he had to choose between feeling and thought, between order and chaos. He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization.”¹⁴³

It is this unique way of grasping the very world around us that *demands* we alter the way in which we habitually perceive nature. But what fuels the creative endeavour was by no means the certitude proclaimed by followers; in fact, Merleau-Ponty describes Cézanne’s life as one of

¹⁴³ Merleau-Ponty (1964) *Cézanne’s Doubt in Sense and Non-Sense*, p.13

misunderstanding and doubt in his own talent.¹⁴⁴ The same could be said of a thinker such as Nietzsche – albeit without the same modesty as Cézanne – who gained their most prominent recognition after their lifetime. What connects these heterogeneous domains of creation is their proclivity to surmount the accepted ways of being that dominate their vocations, irrespective of their work being before their time.

The situation is evidently quite radically different today. In our times, there is no place for the modest creator that does not exude confidence or absolute certitude in their rhetoric. More importantly, however, is the blatant commodification of central figures, contributing to the intensification of our social world through social media applications. What becomes a key factor in our evaluation of worth when it comes to idols is not necessarily their creative attributes, but their amassed followers. Instead of being genuine *idols*, they are merely *influencers* in the egregious sense. That is, their vocation is precisely in the propagation of cheap ideas that serve their economic interests, rather than the interests of those that give them praise.

This leads us to the second point, intricately connected with the first, where we must ask: does the propagation vector seek to consolidate the distribution of power? Do they reaffirm a system of resignation? Or conversely, do they seek for us, the propagators, to *surpass* what they have introduced, giving further extension to the novelty they have brought into existence? Deleuze is exemplary in this regard, and it is the only way we can interpret Foucault seemingly absurd statement that “perhaps one day, this century will be known as *Deleuzian*”.¹⁴⁵ This statement is not meant to assert that we must resign ourselves to Deleuze’s thought and reproduce it (as it seems many authors seem to do). Rather, it should be read and an ode to a radical experimentalism, testifying to the very reality of the unconscious field of desire and the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p.9

¹⁴⁵ Foucault (1977) *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, p.165

potentialities it holds right beneath the surface of actuality. What this means is their orientation toward propagation is not simply to consolidate, but to further promote creative potentiality. Deleuze himself comments on the ‘insidiousness’ character of those who seek to merely emulate the profound and singular style of authors such as Artaud and Kleist.¹⁴⁶ The consequence of such a position is necessarily contrary to the efforts to reproduce and affirm systems of resignation that rule the current sphere of celebrity idolization.

When an idol's relevance can be measured through the quanta of ‘likes’ and ‘followers’ however, the necessity of maintaining and amassing more fans becomes critical to their persona. Similar to the first point we made, creativity is placed on the bottom shelf today, meaning rather than contributing to the advancement of society, we see instead the concretization of the newest modality of exploitation taking place.

It is clear that both points must be taken relatively and should by no means be taken as absolutes. In particular with the first point, that of the origins of the asymmetrical power distribution, it must be noted that in every case a celebrity figure can only emerge through some form of event, as described in the first chapter. The event does not distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ effects nor differences in intensity until *after the fact*, testifying to the relation between desire and its redistribution into different flows. Hence why Deleuze’s work is riddled with cautionary remarks.¹⁴⁷ For an event to be truly radical, it essentially implies that we *cannot see the consequences* prior to its emergence. Such a characteristic also implies the potential of low-grade events taking on the guise of radical turning points. This suggests that there will always be propagation vectors which emerge and seek to concretize their platform at the expense of others.

¹⁴⁶ Deleuze & Guattari (1986) *Nomadology: The War Machine*, p.47

¹⁴⁷ Deleuze & Guattari (1987) p.150

The second point must likewise be taken relatively. The distinction made between efforts to consolidate a distribution of power and one that seeks to transform it logically overlap to some extent. No system of power endures without change, and inversely, no revolutionary transformation can be of any practical importance without some form of propagation.

Once again, we see the perpetual oscillation between a chaotic flux and a system of organization that arranges the uncontrollable flow. Our analysis leads us to consider the very transformations that we undergo as a person, group, and society. At this point, it should be clear that the celebrity figure, a critical propagation vector in the flow of society, works at the juncture between the chaos of the world and its over-determination. While we have attempted to focus more on the beneficial aspect of such a vector, as in the case of Deleuze, the concern that envelops this work is the contrary tendency utilized by these figures which invests in rigid opinions and social polemics which pervade contemporary society. For centuries, we have been fostering a very real fear of our openness, rather than embracing it as the reality of freedom. Instead of investing into our creative potentiality, we have actively conspired against it, resignating our *right to desire*.

This position is summarized simply by the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott when he says:

“In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough of creative living to recognize that for most of their time they are living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine.”¹⁴⁸

It seems to me that this exemplifies the prevailing experience in contemporary society, where the dominant cultural tendency pushes us to passively experience creativity rather than truly engage

¹⁴⁸ Winnicott (1971) *Playing and Reality*, p.76

with it ourselves. So, what can we do to counter this acidic passivity that appears to pervade society, targeting especially adolescence in their prime developmental years? It appears that something as simple as *play* might very well be our answer.

In the previous chapter, we briefly glanced over Mead's comments on the importance of play and games in the development of self, yet we left this domain relatively unexplored, for Mead does not explicitly link it to the nature of creativity. Winnicott, on the other hand, makes it very clear that play is at once essential to the development of self *and* the continuous engagement with creativity.¹⁴⁹ What is unique to the general activity of play is that we are constantly engaging in it, even in domains of life we least expect it. Obviously, at the fourth front of our minds when we think of play are games. Today, games pervade our life like none other, from sports to video games. However, play is not limit to this sphere of life. What is a thinker, other than she/he whom *plays* with ideas? What is an artist, other than she/he whom *plays* with colours, sounds and materials. We could easily brush these modes of play off as mere colloquialisms, however such a rebuttal falls apart when we recognize that, what we might call 'academic' and 'artistic' play, involve strictly the *same structure* of play as that of games.

With the structure of play, we are taken full circle back to our beginning where we confronted the forces of chaos. We recall that we faced radical forces of indetermination that, from the perspective of control appear as a nuisance, but from the perspective of life and reality, contribute to its *vitality*. Returning to our examples, we can see that the vibrancy sports resonate is not just to its participants, but to the fans from anywhere in the world. There is an atmospheric connection to the critical tension *at play* throughout the game which is essential bound to the fact that such a game *is not determined until it is finished*. Is there anything more disappointing than

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p.62-63; as he say's: "*It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative [...] and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.*" p.63

seeing fans leave a stadium early, not because their team might be losing, but more importantly because the resonance with indetermination itself has been lost? Play, simply put, is perhaps *the primordial manifestation of desire*. What we mean by this is that play must be generalized to its maximal degree. It is only then that we can begin to see that play is the very becoming of nature itself.

What does this mean for our relationship to celebrity figures? The ethical problematic regarding idols as present above demarcated the field of our relationship to these figures, and in doing so emerged questions as to the legitimacy of such a rapport. These questions rested on two key attributes of the celebrity figure: they are at once creators and propagators. Yet, what became evident throughout this exhibition of traits was the fact that not all idols emphasized each of these characteristics evenly. Rather than giving prominence to creative activity, not only their own but those of their followers, there is the visceral tendency to focus on consolidating follows for their own self-interests. Such a position is not only beneficial to the celebrity figure in their acquisition of capital, but equally so in terms of energetic efficiency for the masses. The desire to remain entrenched in the opinions of others becomes more appealing than ever before, insofar as we cannot bare the intensity of societies ever fast-moving pace. Thus, we are forced to recognize the fact that it is not simply the resonance we might experience with idols, but also the socio-cultural context justifying our dependence on them.

While we did not give explicit examples of content creators or influencers dominating the scene today, we nevertheless saw tendencies in their actions that can be used as markers for our own reflexive engagement. The intention behind this lack of reference was purposeful: not only are there an almost infinite repertoire of idols occupying every sphere of life to the point that no

one could ever possible critique each and every one of them, but secondly, not every influencer expresses the tendency to exploit their fanbase. In agreement with Deleuze, real theory *will* have practical implication, and as such, I believe it is up to the reader to question their own investments into idols thereby putting the legitimacy of such an ethics to the test.¹⁵⁰

It should be clear at this point that celebrity idols are not evil individuals with the sole intent of exploiting the masses. Yet, nor should they be taken as gods walking the earth amongst us. Celebrity figures are human beings just like you and I, yet they have been fortunate, insofar as they are recognized for *the mode of play they are engaged in*. As someone at the limit of society pressing up against the very boundary of what we consider to be possible, they are entitled to a freedom of play we all deserve to recognize. But this does not mean they are the gatekeepers of the future. True freedom of activity lies at the limit, the position we have already disclosed as bordering between the actual and unforeseen possibilities. If freedom is to be more than a ruse as Han suggests, then it is precisely at this frontier than we should *all* be invested.¹⁵¹

Our investment into celebrity figure is but one of many that we concede to in our daily affairs. Put differently, such an investment of energy contributes to the becoming of our *self*. With our ethical considerations of such an affiliation, we are reminded that the self is never entirely determined, nor completely open to the chaos of the world. The self, in short, is the central milieu where we not only reflexively engage with our investments, but also open ourselves in play. It is within this limited sphere in which we find ourselves that we can extend beyond any fixed determination, opening onto a future we never foresaw.

¹⁵⁰ Foucault (1977) conversation between Foucault and Deleuze, p.208

¹⁵¹ Han (2017) p.1

Conclusion

This thesis began with the unsettling confrontation between the disquietude of encroaching chaos and our all too human attempt to vanquish such a force with opinions and certitude. In spite of all our attempts, both scientifically and politically, to bring order to the world, nature appears to curb any form of absolute unification. In the words of Dewey, “man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it badly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is *uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable*.”¹⁵²

What became evident over the course of the first chapter, was the fact that chaos is an immanent force pervading each and every grain of reality as we know it. To rationalize such an omnipresent and radical force, we reworked our understanding of time to demonstrate that it is through the temporal dynamics of events that chaos actualizes itself. In doing so, we slowly began to answer a distant call of Serres for the sciences – such as Sociology – to embrace the uncertainty of chaos, rather than creating concepts for its evasion.

Having come to terms with the chaotic and thereby evental nature of time, we were then left with the predicament regarding the possibility of such grounding phenomena such as the self. However, such concerns are immediately relinquished when we remind ourselves that the virtuality of chaos does not merely seek to undermine all that is stable and certain, but rather is the vital energy that obliges all actualities to remain open and creative. To clearly articulate this complex point, we translated Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of desire with its unconscious transversal movements into the metaphysical basis for the dynamic play of the self as Mead presents it. In doing so, we saw that while the self appears as a stable and clearly defined object,

¹⁵² Dewey (1958) *Experience and Nature*, p.41

its contour nevertheless remains in a permanent flux, always uncertain as to what it might do or experience.

Finally, with a reconsideration of the self and its dynamics we were at last able to engage with the contemporary social world and our seemingly new obsession with celebrity idols. While no specific idols were engaged with directly, we nevertheless were able to isolate general tendencies that defined their rise to prominence today. Such infatuation with idols proved to be not so much of a new phenomenon, but an intensification of a critical modality social investment. The appeal of investing our desires, both conscious and unconsciously into these individuals, has been consolidated on two fronts: not only do celebrity idols substantiate themselves on the basis of creating events which we are essentially drawn to, but furthermore they provide a beacon of stability from which we can ground our opinions in. This paradoxical characterization of celebrity idols manifests most acutely the unique dynamic we have been underlining all along, between novelty and the unchanging.

This, however, does not imply that we were satisfied with the state of our current relationships to idols pervading the social world. While it is true the opposing characteristics are marks of even the most genuine idols, the tendency of our times seems to place more emphasis on propagating opinions rather than creative potential. Our ethical stance leaves it up to the reader – the individual with the agency to reflexively engage with their own investments, thereby engaging in the same activity that gives rise to true creation: *play*.

Are we satisfied with such conclusions? Does such an ethical task really need to be placed on the shoulders of the reader? It seems to me that to promote moral axioms as most ethics do is to go against the very movement of time itself in its creative advance. A true ethics is one that seeks to create change without invoking the absolute; it seeks to be surpassed like any

other form of novel emergence. In this vein, we concede to indeterminacy, and ask only of the reader to *think*.

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