

Between Psychoanalytic Theory and Formal Sentiment

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Abstract: In this paper, I will argue that all formal sentiment is fundamentally rooted in psychoanalytic theory, and thus activated by it. From there, I will explicate the political reality that then becomes unveiled. Namely, a profound accessibility to form that undermines the capitalist regime's romanticization of alienated labor. I will inform my paper with various major contributions to psychoanalytic theory, aesthetic theory, critical race theory, and Marxist theory.

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"Introduction"

“I wish to stress here that, at first sight, psycho-analysis seems to lead in the direction of idealism...

*...We have only to consider the course of this experience from its first steps to see, on the contrary, that it in no way allows us to accept some such aphorism as ‘life is a dream.’ **No praxis is more orientated towards that which, at the heart of experience, is the kernel of the real than psycho-analysis.**”*

- Jacques Lacan (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1977, p. 53)

The issue of psychoanalytic theory and formal sentiment has been brewing with me since before I knew what these praxes were. I was discontent with the disparate split between form and content, and I was discontent with the split between elitism and "common people." Originally I was on the train of anti-formalist and pro-psychoanalyst, yet psychoanalysts tended to bleed into the same sentiments as formalists. After experiencing profound realizations and connections from psychoanalytic theory that led me to a completely new relationship with formal sentiment as a whole, I still felt strongly for this issue that seemed to drastically deny many access to form, an alienating affliction that correlates with the advancement of capitalism. You should take note that I have nameless implications intertwined with my writing of this paper that surely continue beyond the context of academia. And for what I argue, it absolutely must—this political reality I wade with *cannot* be subsumed by the ideological, and I wish to make it abundantly clear that, the form this paper takes, is but an appropriative object that cumbersomely and contradictorily carries this configuration on, through language.

The capitalist fantasy and the romanticization of alienated labor

I once read a terrible book (which I will not name), gifted to me by my art professor (who I will not name), that listed all of the things a "true" artist ought to do. It glorified this golden image of a sweaty, cerebral, exhausted artist who had no choice but to *breathe art, live art, embody art*. It is the perpetuation of this kind of imagery, rooted in nothing but a capitalist fantasy, that makes people suffer from an alienation that they are unable to place their finger on—it is this kind of capitalist fantasy that alienates people from art.

Art history classes can be unhelpful for this reason—when we intellectually analyze and interact with art in an academic setting, we are distanced from the artworks and artists themselves—they are but names and images projected onto a screen in which the professor representing an institution presents to you, among many other students. You are quite literally the consumer—of the academic institution's promise to educate and assimilate you into upper society—and of the information containing shapes and images and colors (in this theoretical art history class) that these shapes and images and colors are attached to. This applies to not only academic institutions but any institution that associates itself with art—museums, galleries, etc—they all contribute to the reinforcement of a capitalist-art fantasy. In our capitalist fantasy, you are individualized, severed, and subject to the gaze that these institutions impose on you—but they do so in a way that makes you believe they have been your beliefs and desires all along.

To translate it to Lacanian terms, the capitalist fantasy's *objet petit a*, or object-cause of desire, is retroactively formed by the behavior of others who exude symptoms of being under the same fantasy. Its *objet a*, or symbolic substitute object of desire is capitalist affirmation, whether that be intelligible success or pseudo-political affirmation. Under the capitalist fantasy, there is

no distinction between labor and individual value; the fetishization of 'genius' as an implicit capitalistic value takes place (often as the functioning *objet a*); the fetishization of a profound, specialized, and singular 'purpose' per individual takes place, and, alienated labor becomes romanticized.

The concepts of alienation, commodification of labor, and the worker's estrangement from their essence were originally introduced by Karl Marx in *Estranged Labor*. Reading *Estranged Labor* for the first time during my third semester of college was a violent epiphany that instigated this continued work in progress. Marx argues, "Labor is external to the worker...he does not affirm himself but denies himself" (*The German Ideology*, 74). Denying oneself remains consistent under the capitalist fantasy, however, the form that alienated labor takes becomes more disguised and complex, feigning self-interest to its host, yet, like a parasite from within, it in actuality entirely exists to service the perpetuation of the fantasy. Furthermore, "Alienated labor turns the species-life into an alien being. It alienates from man his own body, external nature, his mental life and his human life" (*The German Ideology*, 72). Despite the profound experience of the alienated subject's product of labor standing alien against them, this violent symptom of the capitalist fantasy becomes tidily naturalized and relabeled as the inherent nature of all labor.

Another terribly insightful piece I have come across, which is where I became more informed by the violently efficient naturalization of capitalism and its effects, is Todd McGowan's article, *The Capitalist Gaze*. McGowan writes that capitalism's "basic trick consists not in hiding its existence but rather in proclaiming it," furthermore "Capitalism's appeal as an economic system stems in part from its capacity to protect subjects from seeing their own role in constituting the system in which they participate" (McGowan, *The Capitalist Gaze*, 5). The

slickness of capitalism that McGowan draws out is crucial to understanding why the capitalist fantasy is so prevalent despite an atmosphere of political progression and "Marxists."

I wish not to digress too far, but as for another noteworthy point in considering the neurotic's predicament within the capitalist fantasy, McGowan writes how Freud (lamentingly) defines therapeutic success "not as allowing the realization of self-interest but instead as 'transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness'" (McGowan, *The Capitalist Gaze*, 6). McGowan goes on to write, "A system structured around the pursuit of self-interest is thus in no way suited to subjects of the drive but instead results from a political decision that they continue to make unconsciously through their participation in the capitalist system. But capitalism relies on disguising this decision through the appearance of naturalness" (McGowan, *The Capitalist Gaze*, 6). Beyond the immediate issue of alienation, the capitalist fantasy not only fails to tend to a split subject's satisfaction (however convoluted the path may be), but also *pretends* to sufficiently be in the interest of the subject.

Alienated labor is, in this capitalist-liberal society, a necessary and inevitable rite of passage that must be identified, outlined, captured, and overcome by the persistent and self-reflective individual. Arbitrarily, oppression is romanticized and given social praise in our current capitalist-liberal culture, driving those who are dissatisfied with their state of social/political value to find a way to *contrive an oppressed identity* that is an *entirely content-based appropriation*, intelligible to symbolic society. One consequence of this is the formation of identity politics 'heroes,' and identity politics 'villains.' To avoid being an identity politics 'villain,' and/or to become an identity politics 'hero,' *is the motive for faked genuine meaning*. This is highly related to the Lacanian gaze, as this fear of being an identity politics 'villain' is so effective, that we find ourselves policing one another's 'political correctness.'

Prolonged participation in accommodating the capitalist gaze (disguised as the political gaze) through the acts of contriving an oppressed identity and policing political correctness is incredibly alienating and harmful.

This encouragement of alienated labor extends to artmaking, and has given birth to the rapid rise of alienated artmaking. It is tricky to detect because artmaking is socially understood as an unalienated mode of self-expression—however, its evolution in recent years has taken a disturbing turn. Because genuine and unalienated access to formal sentiment takes intentional time and effort, the urgent nature of the capitalist fantasy has rapidly mutilated access to authentic formal sentiment, romanticizing the alienated labor of fabricating 'elusive artistic genius.' Furthermore, there is a new and insidious motive to imbue meaning into art—social and political value. It is often portrayed to others (and even the artist to themselves in an act of denial) as an unalienated act, but this is only to further boost its social or political value. Art is not exempt from the effects of capitalism, and as a result of this, we find faked genuine meaning in art.

It is a new kind of alienated labor for those who are willing to tolerate it for what it yields in contemporary society—political affirmation which yields the true prize—capitalist affirmation. This kind of alienated labor is addictive for individuals who find themselves insecure among social signifiers (which is nearly everyone). But what's worse, is that this compels even those who want to have genuine intentions. No one is exempt from the addictive appeal of alienated labor's promise seen in today's ever-hypocritical "Marxist" culture. Capitalistic affirmation, disguised as political affirmation, is an affirmation of one's safety under the capitalist gaze. The self-misdiagnosis of modern victims of the capitalist gaze as "Marxists" leaves them in a predicament of hypocrisy and romanticized alienated labor, disguised as unalienated labor. It is

truly a contagious and alienating affliction. But, do not worry, my friend—we are not confined to cynicism. An unalienated disposition, where split subjects are implicated within and belong to both form and content, is within our political reality. I am pleased to introduce you to a psychoanalytic understanding of formal sentiment.

Psychoanalytic foundations of formal sentiment; productive frictions

Something I wish someone had bluntly and plainly laid before me as a suffering young art major, was a clear explanation of aesthetic sentiment and form, which shrivels the mysterious and elusive exclusivity of our art world that the capitalist fantasy perpetuates. Consequently, art doesn't have to be some kind of religion you must place unwavering faith in, in order to feel its "truth." Art is not God, and you are not a bad Christian. So, let me first lay down a basic description of formal sentiment, before I argue its fundamental relation to psychoanalysis.

Formal or aesthetic sentiment can be described as a "switch in lens focus." Rather than mediating feeling through established constructs in our society —human, dog, food, tree, racism, movie, French, woman, gay, sex, feminism, house, New York, Donald Trump, etc.—you rather develop a more direct route from the visual (color, shape, balance, texture, etc) to the unconscious, one that doesn't depend so much on social signifiers/content as a middle man. As such, formal sentiment is perhaps more intuitive for perverts than it is for neurotics.

Regardless, formal sentiment in the symbolic world must be awakened and fostered—this is because the tension between being a lacking subject (allowing for formal-sentiment) and being assimilated into the symbolic world (allowing for content-sentiment) subjects all, especially neurotics, to a certain obstacle in the way of formal sentiment, as the symbolic realm is where we all irremediably reside. This is why I problematize a purely ontological approach to art, which

severs the condition of tension-form's inextricability. I will elaborate more on this in just a few paragraphs.

In *The Dehumanization of Art*, Ortega y Gasset lays out the concept of formalism, writing “Art begins when the human component in events no longer occupies the center of the picture” (Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*, 15). Note that the term "dehumanization" simply refers to the abstraction of art, where humans and other semblances of our symbolic world are not in the picture. In other words, he is calling for a formalist approach to art, arguing that employing content-based elements within an artwork stunts its formal potential. This has been a very basic explanation of form, akin to the a combination of the definitions of *abstraction* and *logic*. Now, I bring in the psychoanalysis (which was already there).

In its psychoanalytic nature, formal sentiment, is, a sensitivity to the manipulation of stimuli that interrogates the gap between one’s conscious and unconscious, or, similarly, one’s symbolic and real. It can manifest as comedy, horror, pleasure, et cetera. This is not a new concept in psychoanalytic film theory, however, film as a medium has an emphasis on content that has delayed its corresponding psychoanalytic theory's application to aesthetic theory and formal sentiment in general. It is my goal to problematize this ongoing, implicit separation between form and psychoanalytic theory, and, by extension, the implicit and ongoing separation between form and content, (and, by extension, the implicit and ongoing separation between alienation and the capitalist fantasy).

Tracking psychoanalytic film theory onto aesthetic theory roots form in an implicit, collective unconscious, sidestepping a purely hermeneutic approach to the unconscious and instead engaging with its silent shapes and movements. In the next section, you will find that I critique Adorno's entirely hermeneutic understanding of psychoanalytic theory.

To take in a work of art, then, is neither purely biological nor ideological; it involves interaction with one's gap as a split subject—this gap resides in the psyche. Furthermore, there is no form without formal sentiment, no formal sentiment without stimulating lack, and no lack without the unconscious. My argument centers around formal sentiment more so than form itself. However, given my psychoanalytic understanding of form, you would correctly assume that I object to distinguishing form from formal sentiment. Yes, I am privileging a phenomenological approach over an ontological approach, though both have their place in the hierarchy—phenomenology is what allows for ontology in the first place. This works in tension with much of Adorno's work on the "truth value" of artworks, as my argument necessitates that form cannot exist without formal sentiment, which cannot exist without being sensed, which cannot exist without a subject capable of sensation. Please read the section "*Dovetail objection; Lacanian circuit*" for a very important configuration of unalienated psychoanalytic knowledge-production (and unalienated formal sentiment-production by extension), using Lacan's own model of the circuit of the drive. I will talk more simply about Lacan here.

Jacques Lacan is a revolutionary figure, as he is the one who took Sigmund Freud's discoveries and made psychoanalysis theoretical, thus doing the golden act of combining form and content into one entity. Thus, psychoanalytic theory is no longer just a content-based medical field, nor is it an ideological fantasy limited to the symbolic boundaries of academia. It is, instead, a political reality. I am unable to cover from scratch the entire extent to which psychoanalytic theory is overwhelmingly present, especially formulations of the drive and fantasy. But three concepts I will spend time illustrating are the gaze, productive friction (and perversion by extension), and the Lacanian circuit of the drive. I will talk about productive friction now, and the other two later in this paper.

Beyond stimulating one's "lack gap," psychoanalysis and formal sentiment are implicated within each other in several more specific, related ways. One of these ways is subjection to the gaze, which I talk more about in the section "*The gaze in artworks; praise for graphic abstraction.*" Another one of these ways is productive friction—originally drawn by Foucault's debunking of the repressive hypothesis, which I will track onto newer psychoanalytic work on the transgressive pervert. By abstracting these works in both sexuality and psychoanalytic theory, I hope to demonstrate that form is inherently sexual, and creating is inherently sexual.

Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis highlights this productive friction, arguing, "Rather than the uniform concern to expel, it appears that the central issue ... was to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative" (Foucault 1990, 36). This critique reveals the relationship between repression and the very structures it ostensibly opposes, suggesting that repression serves as a means to organize and sustain power dynamics rather than merely suppress them. The friction between repression and its outcomes mirrors the dynamics explored in psychoanalytic theories of the transgressive pervert.

In *Perversion and the Social Relation*, Rothenberg, Foster, and Žižek examine the pervert's relationship with the symbolic order, suggesting that "Perversion... is precisely an insubordinate position in relation to the symbolic order" (Žižek, in Rothenberg et al., 2003, 92). This insubordination, however, depends on the presence of the symbolic order itself. As Bruce Fink writes, "Perversion involves the attempt to prop up the law so that limits can be set to jouissance" (Fink 2003, 38). In this sense, the pervert both relies on and transgresses the law, deriving their jouissance from its boundaries—a relationship that echoes Foucault's notion of repression producing its own counterpoints.

Fink further elaborates that “The moral law...is...an expression of the Other's desire” (Fink 2003, 56), grounding the law within the structure of relational desire. The pervert’s engagement with the law becomes an active negotiation with this desire, setting the stage for their transgressive actions. This productive friction, central to both Foucault’s analysis and psychoanalytic explorations, underscores the interdependence between repression and its supposed counterforces. Turning briefly to neuroticism, Fink offers a complementary perspective: “Neurosis can be understood as a set of strategies by which people protest against a 'definitive' sacrifice of jouissance...and come to desire in relation to the law” (Fink 2003, 38). Where perversion seeks jouissance through the law’s limits, neurosis protests the definitive sacrifice of jouissance, inverting the dynamic seen in perversion. This opposition between neurosis and perversion illustrates how different psychic structures engage with the law and jouissance in inverted yet very similar forms. Friction—being tracked all the way down to the the Law of the Father, repression, and disavowal—is inextricable from sexuality. Thus, creation, inextricable from friction, is inextricable from psychosexuality. Likewise, formal sentiment, inextricable from lack, is also inextricable from psychosexuality.

Critique of Adorno's critique of the psychoanalytic theory of art

In his book *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno critiques the psychoanalytic theory of art, stating that it "considers artworks to be essentially unconscious projections of those who have produced them, and, preoccupied with the hermeneutics of thematic material, it forgets the categories of form." (Adorno 1970, 8). I respond to Adorno’s configuration of the psychoanalytic theory of art as “narrow-minded,” by turning the designation of “narrow-mindedness” on him, and hope to illustrate how he overlooks formal sentiment’s condition of being fundamentally rooted in

psychoanalytic theory. Adorno claims that a psychoanalytic approach to art is “more productive psychologically than aesthetically,” and this is where I draw his mistake—the psychological and the aesthetic cannot be divorced so cleanly as he makes it out to be.

“According to the tone of psychoanalytic monographs, art should deal affirmatively with the negativity of experience. The negative element is held to be nothing more than the mark of that process of repression that obviously goes into the artwork. For psychoanalysis, artworks are daydreams; it confuses them with documents and displaces them into the mind of a dreamer, while on the other hand, as compensation for the exclusion of the extramental sphere, it reduces artworks to crude thematic material, falling strangely short of Freud’s own theory of the ‘dreamwork’...As with all positivists, the fictional element in artworks is vastly overestimated by the presumed analogy with the dream. In the process of production, what is projected is only one element in the artist’s relation to the artwork and hardly the definitive one; idiom and material have their own importance, as does, above all, the product itself; this rarely if ever occurs to the analysts” (Adorno 1970, 9).

Adorno’s critique incorporates a misguided emphasis on dreams, a misguided concentration on “thematic content,” and a misguided overlooking of form acting as the content. Ironically, in his critique of psychoanalytic theory only addressing one element of the artwork, Adorno himself only addresses one element of psychoanalytic theory: the analogy. Specifically the analogy between thematic content and repressed desires. A more careful consideration of psychoanalytic theory in its relation to art would realize that it is not, in fact, appropriately reduced to a positivist approach. No other praxis is as comfortable with contradiction, paradox, and negative presences as that of psychoanalytic theory.

So, Adorno’s critique of the psychoanalytic theory of art is ironically unfounded, in that his critique takes the exact form of what he attempts to designate as the character of that which he is critiquing. “If art has psychoanalytic roots, then they are the roots of fantasy in the fantasy

of omnipotence. This fantasy includes the wish to bring about a better world. This frees the total dialectic, whereas the view of art as a merely subjective language of the unconscious does not even touch it" (Adorno 1970, 9). Adorno makes the mistaken move of defining the field of psychoanalysis as that of being hermeneutics-based, that of being content-based, that of being dogmatically positivist. A deeper understanding of the role of the unconscious within psychoanalytic theory would offer one the profound failure of language and interpretation, hence why I argue that Adorno's classification of psychoanalysis as "positivist" to be misguided. Adorno conflates the field of psychoanalysis with a simplistic model focused solely on the subjective language of the unconscious. What he fails to address is that the primal movements of formal sentiments are inherently in conversation with the viewer's (not the artist's) unconscious desires—without the unconscious, there is no sentiment.

As previously mentioned, formal sentiment is a sensitivity to the manipulation of stimuli that interrogates the gap between one's conscious and unconscious, or, similarly, one's symbolic and real. There is no form without formal sentiment, there is no formal sentiment without stimulating lack, and there is no lack without the unconscious.

"But psychoanalysis too casts a spell related to idealism, that of an absolutely subjective sign system denoting subjective instinctual impulses. It unlocks phenomena, but falls short of the phenomenon of art. Psychoanalysis treats artworks as nothing but facts, yet it neglects their own objectivity, their inner consistency, their level of form, their critical impulse, their relation to nonpsychical reality, and finally, their idea of truth...Skepticism toward anthropological theories of human invariants recommends psychoanalytic theory. But this theory is more productive psychologically than

aesthetically...Only dilettantes reduce everything in art to the unconscious, repeating clichés.” (Adorno 1970, 9).

Form is grounded in a collective unconscious space—I wish here to deemphasize the hermeneutic and language-based approach to the unconscious, and rather draw on the silent shape and movement that it takes. This political reality I wade with cannot be subsumed by the ideological, and I wish to make it abundantly clear that, the form this essay takes, is but an appropriative object that clumsily and contradictorily carries this configuration on, through language. To take in a work of art is not a solely biological nor an ideological function. Formal sentiment when engaging in all kinds of creative work, including written work that utilizes language, necessarily interacts with one’s libidinal economy and psyche. Aesthetic pleasure is inextricable from the libidinal economy because pleasure is inextricable from the libidinal economy. Formal sentiment is inextricable from the libidinal economy, and, thus, the aesthetic is inextricable from the libidinal economy.

Again, I wish to stress that only a sociosymbolically mediated understanding of "arousal" as something extricably primal would result in an Adornian offense to the libidinal economy. Dissimilarly, Adorno's approach to the subject-object in *Aesthetic Theory* insightfully holds space for complexity between mediated subjectivity and objective judgment that isn't consistent with his approach to psychosexuality. Furthermore, structuring anthropological theory and psychoanalytic theory as opposed to one another is another false move. Form cannot exist without being activated by its viewer—similarly, in anthropology, a construct or practice cannot exist without being understood by its surrounding culture. To take Adorno’s own reasoning, it is the remaining negative space shaped by the positive substance of a subject’s sentiment wherein which form lies. To argue for an objective existence of form on its own accord is to privilege the

ideological. Psychoanalysis does not privilege the ideological, and neither does art.

Condemningly deciding anthropology and psychoanalysis to be limited to that of hermeneutics and language is a hypocritical move on Adorno's part.

I wish here to emphasize that grasping the major content and hermeneutics of a field such as psychoanalysis is not to be conflated with becoming implicated within the form that it takes. As content is stagnant, and form moves. In his criticism, Adorno has successfully mutilated the delicate formal aspect within the fields of psychoanalysis, anthropology, and art. Adorno's fetishistic fixation on "truth" within a "nonpsychical reality" is the Lacanian *objet petit a* that, his fantasy, birthed from the psyche, revolves around. It seems likely to me that Adorno has paved philosophical routes as alternatives to account for his experience of the gaze and (unconscious) desire in his determination of the nature of art. I mean all of this to say, psychoanalysis is rooted in form, and form is rooted in psychoanalysis. My motivation in countering Adorno's critique is that I believe that it appropriates psychoanalysis into an ideological, language-based, positivist practice, which couldn't be further from the truth, and severs the potential of overcoming alienation and bringing formal sentiment into the raw, political reality. If we are to take the issue of alienation seriously, then we need to take psychoanalysis seriously—both are more effectively combatted through abstraction and formal sentiment, as both are constructed by abstract and formal substances in themselves. However, dear reader, please do not read this critique of Adorno and leave with the impression that I do not heavily adore his ideas. I find his work in *Aesthetic Theory* to be terribly expert, and I personally find it profoundly psychoanalytic despite his own disagreement with it. I will elaborate more on this in the section *Form with content; mediating critical race theory and formal abstraction...*

Dovetail objection; Lacanian circuit

In this section, I want to problematize any sort of casual, unimplicated relationship with psychoanalytic theory, and formal sentiment by extension. This is in the interest of increasing accessibility to overcome alienation. A casual attitude may at first seem as though it makes psychoanalytic theory more accessible to people, but in reality, it is inappropriately deceptive, allowing people to appropriate a relationship with psychoanalysis whilst remaining unimplicated from the theory itself. Thus, psychoanalytic theory becomes severed from its immense potential as a political reality, and it becomes what this approach has been trying to counter in the first place—forming psychoanalytic theory into yet another ideological fantasy. And so alienation remains because we have disregarded the necessity of fantasy. Here’s an excerpt from Introduction: *The Critique of Pure Enjoyment, or Jouissance Does Not Exist* in the book “Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive” (by Adrian Johnston & foreword by Slavoj Zizek):

“One of the most basic insights of psychoanalysis is that human beings say more than they know. Their various utterances and behaviors are significantly shaped by an unconscious dimension woven into the fabric of their awareness. Accordingly, the art of analysis doesn’t involve dogmatically disregarding the manifest features of quotidian existence in favor of groping about in search of some dark and hidden psychical underbelly; it isn’t a vulgar depth psychology in which the superficial structured façade of sociosymbolically mediated cognition is crudely opposed to the murky and opaque bog of a fleshly nature in its wild, untamed essence.

The unconscious is “out there,” inscribed within the field of consciousness and its correlative reality as a set of internally excluded configurations. And these configurations, rather than being relatively superfluous parasitical supplements or marginalities, lend this reality its very texture and determine the actual contours of consciousness itself.

Consequently, isn't it possible that common sense, so to speak, knows more than it knows? In the wake of Freud (especially in terms of his "psychopathology of everyday life"), shouldn't a research program be forged that would entail, among other activities, taking hackneyed bits of popular wisdom much more literally and seriously than this "wisdom" takes itself when, with mechanically thoughtless nonchalance, it casually rolls off someone's lips?

Likewise, the conclusions reached by a complex theoretical endeavor need not be of an intangibly abstract, counterintuitive sort. Although philosophical and psychoanalytic systems of thought obviously depart from familiar patterns of understanding, thereby rising above the limitations imposed by unsophisticated epistemological habits and assumptions, the results achieved by these theoretical apparatuses should dovetail with (rather than automatically contradict and condescendingly condemn) the banal, everyday world out of which *The Critique of Pure Enjoyment, or Jouissance Does Not Exist xxvii Introduction* they arise and which they should seek to elucidate.

Furthermore, intuitive conclusions often, in the course of being theoretically explicated and justified, require the most counter-intuitive of premises, the most contorted of conceptual acrobatics—the means are frequently more informative than the end. Indeed, as with human desire itself, the movement of the journey might be more important than the goal of the destination" (Zizek, *Introduction, The Critique of Pure Enjoyment, or Jouissance Does Not Exist xxvii*).

I see well how this dovetail explanation is in the interest of preventing psychoanalytic theory from becoming too intertwined with the ideological fantasy. It is also an important acknowledgment of political possibilities and liberation outside of the psychoanalytic field. It is self-aware in that psychoanalytic theory is only one route of "wisdom," of which there have been and will continue to be countless others, for similar purposes and ends. This excerpt doesn't necessarily describe the shape of the means to be a dovetail, but rather the results—I recognize this distinction. It also deemphasizes the specifics of "conceptual acrobatics" within the field,

and rather focuses on the importance of the “movement of the journey” as opposed to the “final destination.” I agree with these ideas and do not reject them—but I will explain why I believe associating psychoanalysis with a dovetail to be inappropriate and dangerous.

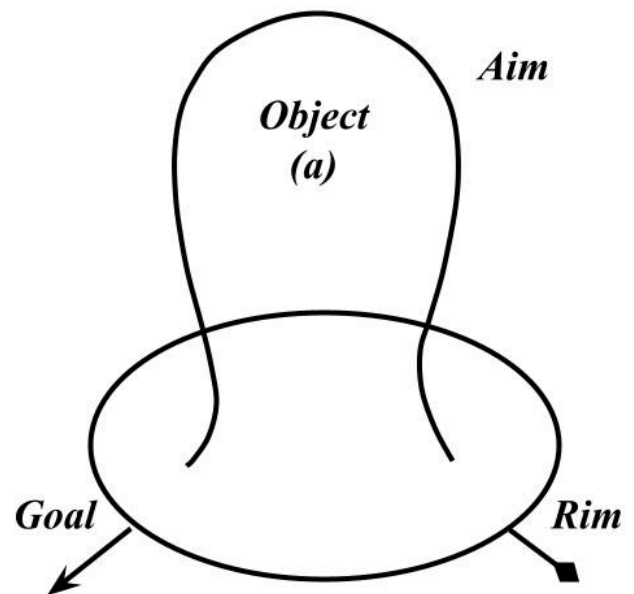
I feel it to be inappropriate to describe this process by a dovetail at all, in any context that is not defining it to be a minor retroactive observation. What makes it more inappropriate is the lack of emphasis on a necessarily contrary and counterintuitive stance to instigate the journey. This dovetail concept makes, in my opinion, the field of psychoanalysis out to be inappropriately casual and deceptively accessible, which may be in the interest of benefiting more people, but will ultimately make it more difficult for people to actually become implicated. The reason why I take issue with this dovetail theory is its blindness to the difference between what I will call a “somatic” position and “psychic” position. Another way of thinking about it, is the difference between the form and the content. The content may very well echo that of sans-psychoanalytic knowledge’s, but the form is categorically different.

Although the pre and post-position of psychoanalytic knowledge may very well be on the same somatic parallel—that is, the post-position does not contradict the pre-position, but rather appears to dovetail it—the instigation of the process from pre to post **necessarily** contradicts the pre-position (albeit temporarily, but entirely invested). A fundamental misunderstanding of this process is what leads to declaring it a “dovetail”—it is not by simply taking banal wisdom “more seriously” that instigates this process. Rather, it is a blatant disavowal of the status quo that circles back to the same “somatic” position, but a *vastly* different psychic position. Indeed, it is true when he says, “the means are frequently more informative than the end.” But make no mistake on what instigates the means, and make no mistake on the necessarily contrary, condemning attitude of the means.

To assume that the overall shape from the pre to post-position assumes that of a dovetail is to mistakenly and retroactively assume that the security granted from the post-position has always and already been available to the pre-position. This retroactively held belief by the privileged position is a gravely false one. Referring back to the excerpt, “dogmatically disregarding the manifest features of quotidian existence” in search of “some dark and hidden psychological underbelly” is quite exactly what needs to take place in the pre-position. A “crude opposition” to “sociosymbolically mediated cognition” is necessarily in order before the journey takes place. It is a fantasy in itself to believe we can overlook the importance and relevance of fantasy in our lives.

So, if not a dovetail, then what do I propose the shape of psychoanalytic theory to take? Lacan’s diagram of the circular path of the drive—beginning by piercing the rim, reaching towards the object a, but ultimately circumventing it, then at last returning the circuit of the drive, where the goal lies.

(Autistic Rims and Their Vicissitudes - European Journal of Psychoanalysis, page 178 of Seminar XI)



If the rim is akin to the pre-position, the object a being the fantasmatic appearance of “unknown wisdom in its wild, untamed essence”, which completely contradicts or condemns the “banal every day life,” and the goal is the post-position, then the aim is the process, or the means of psychoanalytic theory. It must begin by penetrating the rim, temporarily in the opposite direction, towards the object a, which seems

to be a far-away ideological fantasy of “unknown wisdom,” but ultimately circumvents it and arrives at the goal. I argue that the rim and the goal may be on the same plane of somatic position, but an entirely different psychic position. The process of the aim has expelled the initial excess of alienated, restless psychic energy, and has replaced it with immediate, intuitive thinking, new psychic movement, and healthy satisfaction/fulfillment. One cannot skip this process and simply horizontally slide from rim to goal—there must be the object a that serves as the temporary goal for the aim, contradicting “banal, everyday life.”

I believe these kinds of misconceptions are a direct hindrance to overcoming alienation. Fulfillment and anxiety are found in the same somatic position - in front of the veil or the gaze. However, they are clearly not the same. This is because the psychic position differs greatly. Problematizing this dovetail supports an approach that opens up space to navigate between fulfillment and anxiety—it opens up opportunities for fulfillment and empowerment to the originally alienated subject. Though we may already “know” a piece of wisdom’s content, it is a far cry from internalizing it. Knowing a wisdom’s content as it exists within the symbolic realm versus experiencing the primal movement of a wisdom’s form in the tenderest parts of one’s psyche, is night and day. And it requires something dramatic. It absolutely cannot be casual. We need to be dogmatic about disregarding the quotidian existence of daily life, of refusing sociosymbolically mediated cognition, of desperately searching for something that’s “out there.” This fantasy is not some laughable human fault, but rather is an essential part of becoming implicated and empowered by psychoanalytic theory within our political reality. Fantasy is essential in overcoming alienation. Fantasy is essential in transforming our political reality. What is essential to grappling with alienation and anxiety, and claiming access to one’s fulfillment and happiness, is psychoanalytic knowledge, a deep-felt understanding of one’s psyche. So, that is

why it disturbs me to hear the effect of psychoanalysis described as a dovetail effect. It is not a dovetail effect, especially to the majority of the population. It is a retroactive and mistaken belief held from a comfortable, privileged position that we should adopt a casual attitude. We cannot afford to be casual about happiness.

I believe in a categorically transformed reality and existence that grows and grows on itself like a snowball, empowered by psychoanalytic knowledge, disregarding however subtle the difference in surface-level content may be. This is not an ideological fantasy—this is a political reality.

As put by Lacan:

“I wish to stress here that, at first sight, psycho-analysis seems to lead in the direction of idealism...

... We have only to consider the course of this experience from its first steps to see, on the contrary, that it in no way allows us to accept some such aphorism as ‘life is a dream.’ No praxis is more orientated towards that which, at the heart of experience, is the kernel of the real than psycho-analysis” (Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 53).

Content with form; mediating critical race theory and formal abstraction

One of the best mediations between form and content in art that I have come across so far is Susan Sontag's work, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. In *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Susan Sontag advocates for an experiential approach to art over intellectual interpretation, completely in line with the view of form as accessible and liberated from capitalist alienation. Sontag writes, “In place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art” (*Against Interpretation*, 1966, p. 14). Sontag's work counters a purely content-based approach, as the act

of interpretation is entirely content-based. Yet, her work also counters a purely formalist approach, which ironically also takes the form of interpretation—this is because we don't have access to pure form as compromised residents of the symbolic world, and so we can only engage with pure form through *content-based methods*, paradoxically. As Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*—"even aesthetic forms tend historically toward becoming material of a second order. The means, without which there would be no form, undermine form" (Adorno 1970, 146).

And, an incredible quote from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* that resoundingly illustrates the inextricability of form and content, which is, to me, emphatically psychoanalytic, despite his own criticism of the psychoanalytic theory of art: "Indeed, what is formed, the content [*Inhalt*] does not amount to objects external to form; rather, the content is mimetic impulses that are drawn into the world of images that is form" (Adorno 1970, 142). Content can never become extricated nor rid itself of form, and form can never rid itself of content—Adorno establishes this with an expert explanation—content, simultaneously despite being and *because* of it being sociosymbolically and historically mediated, becomes the stuff of form, brings the life to form, draws the line from subject to formal movement. *Mimetic impulses* in particular strike me as psychoanalytic and related to the gaze, in that something in the symbolic realm manages to penetrate the eye and stimulate something unnameable and untouchable. Is it not, that the path from the symbolic to the real, has been rigorously developed by psychoanalytic theorists?

Furthermore, do you not think it interesting that Sontag's work argues for an "erotics of art"? *Coincidentally*, psychoanalytic theory rests on the psychosexual libidinal economy. Ladies and gentlemen—formal sentiment is inherently sexual because sensation is inherently sexual. All objections to the previous statement are informed by a sociosymbolically mediated relationship to the word "sexual."

Frantz Fanon's combination of psychoanalytic theory and critical race theory in *Black Skin, White Masks* is what brought it to life. A fatal flaw in the field of identity politics is its entirely content-based foundation. So, in this section, I will counter the argument that formalism and abstraction are in opposition to critical race theory.

In *Anteaesthetics*, Rizvana Bradley discusses an “anteaesthetic” approach that “precedes” aesthetics altogether, contending it is inherently and inextricably intertwined within the racial regime. Bradley states, “Anteaesthetics involves an engagement with forms prior to their domestication within capitalist modes of exchange” (Bradley, *Anteaesthetics*, 2020, p. 5). Further, she writes, “Anteaesthetics theorizes black experiments and inhabitations that are before the racial regime of aesthetics” (p. 33). Bradley critiques the “failure of conventional art criticism to attend to black art without immediate recourse to the representational protocols of the racial regime of aesthetics,” observing that “the black artwork is figured as a vehicle for the transmission of presumptively transparent ethnographic content. To the extent that the formal experimentations of an artwork are taken seriously, the artist is lauded for transcending their otherwise limiting identitarian attachments” (*Anteaesthetics*, p. 35). This underscores how racial violence and the trauma inflicted by the sociosymbolic world are not secondary but rather integral to understanding critical race theory's interplay with formalism. This aligns with the impossibility of pure formalism. Yet, there is a danger to conflating aesthetics and hegemonic racial regimes as one, which I will elaborate on in a few paragraphs.

In *The Oppositional Gaze* from *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks introduces the concept of an empowered gaze as a form of resistance, reclaiming narrative power and reinforcing form's accessibility and agency. She asserts, “There is power in looking,” and, “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality” (hooks, *Black Looks*, 1992, p. 115).

However, hooks also warns of “the masochistic look of victimization,” describing it as a “spectacle of regression” that parallels a form of Stockholm syndrome where, ultimately, “we come home to ourselves” not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Beyond the context of practical formal sentiment, hooks' powerful grasp on the power of opposition is an undeniable wall-breaking for black liberation. In my *dovetail objection*, opposition is the singlehandedly most crucial step of the Lacanian circuit. Yet, in the interest of reinforcing her position, I wish to fervidly warn against becoming stagnant in a state of sociosymbolic opposition.

Note carefully that what I'm about to say will appear to lead toward idealism, but in fact is quite the opposite. The rhetoric that abstraction is rooted in white supremacy is severely harmful to the complete development of unstinted liberation of oppressed groups. The necessity of residing within a historicized, symbolic realm in which one condemns the status quo is the necessary attitude in the pre-position. With regard to hooks' emphasis on a historicization of women, the position she resides in is closer to the symbolic, for clearly understandable reasons as her contingent state of affairs is an involuntarily material one. Although the contingent and unequal access to formal sentiment is unspeakably traumatic to those confined to the painful sensations of their oppressive material environment (caused by content-based contingencies in the symbolic world), I heavily warn against conflating formal sentiment's abstraction with hegemonic structures. Diagnosing this trauma as entirely content-based is only halfway of the Lacanian path that I refer to in my section, "*Dovetail objection*," and getting "stuck" in the middle of this circuit is dangerous and harmful, as it is a dramatic circuit.

The celebration of the oppositional gaze as hooks describes is imperative to instigating the route of liberation and empowerment for split subjects. But a prolonged amount of time in

this cynical, oppositional state will lead to an excess build-up of repression and alienation, and fails to complete the route of the Lacanian circuit of the drive that I refer to in my dovetail objection. Thus, these split subjects will never be able to access fundamental, childlike satisfaction and unalienated fulfillment that is on the other end of the rim, within our political reality, and unimaginably freer.

To insist on a historicization of subjects and to condemn the aesthetic regime and/or abstraction is absolutely necessary in the pre-position, but its prolonged practice ultimately worsens alienation in split subjects, and denies them the opportunity for unrepressed, floating fulfillment. Cynicism / opposition / dissatisfaction is forever an incredibly necessary presence (in which I criticize some psychoanalysts for overlooking in my dovetail objection), but in tandem, its temporality is also absolutely essential. Conflating this trauma with formalism altogether and denouncing abstraction for a solely content-based, identity-politics direction has a fatal flaw. Without harnessing form, the field's content can be manipulated into any purpose and become appropriated and abused for ulterior motives. A theory's form exists whether it chooses to acknowledge it or not. If critical race theory were to turn away from its formal potential, it would become extremely vulnerable to appropriation and exploitation for other disguised purposes (as it has already done so). In other words, a disproportionately content-based approach results in a completely inconsistent, arbitrary, and dangerously vulnerable form that contradicts itself in a fickle manner because it is entirely historical.

A tendency that I frequently notice in critical race theory is a stagnant placement at the "aim" of the Lacanian circuit of the drive, which I elaborate more on in my section, *Dovetail objection*. Following the logic of this Lacanian circuit, an utterly anti-formalist stance is indeed a necessary aim, however, this must be a *temporary* stance, which its object of desire becomes

circumvented to return back to the rim and arrive at an unalienated, profound resonance with form—a resonance with form that reveals its primacy over the historical hegemonies which may have delayed this access to formal sentiment in the first place. Then, one will see that this all becomes a story of conflict, trauma, repression, grief, and resolution. Critical race theory must not get stuck in the often fantasmic glorification of repression.

The gaze in artworks; praise for graphic abstraction

As previously mentioned, the gaze is one of several more specific interrelated manifestations of the psychoanalytic nature of formal sentiment. In this section, I will focus on the gaze which an artwork may subject its viewer to. Being subjected to an artwork's gaze may be pleasurable, or, in some cases, disturbingly uncomfortable, but, regardless, it is an unalienated experience. Jacques Lacan explains that "the function of the picture...has a relation with the gaze" and provocatively adds that the painter almost says to the viewer, "*You want to see? Well, take a look at this!*" (*Seminar XI*, p. 101). Todd McGowan elaborates on this concept, noting, "The gaze, as Lacan theorizes it, is...the point at which the distortion caused by the subject's desire becomes visible as a disruption in the visual field. It exposes the unnatural status of the apparently natural visible world and forces us to reexamine everything that we see." This confrontation with the gaze is inherently political, revealing that the visual field is not neutral but rather shaped by the subject's desire, which destabilizes its apparent objectivity.

Joan Copjec underscores the transformative impact of the gaze, writing that "at the moment the gaze is discerned, the image, the entire visual field, takes on a terrifying alterity" (Copjec 1994, 33). This alterity collapses the distance inherent in looking, exposing the constitutive role of desire in shaping perception and revealing the visual field's lack of neutrality.

The trauma of encountering the gaze lies in recognizing the power of one's own desire in forming what is seen.

I will implicitly elaborate more in the next sub-section *Praise for graphic abstraction*, but to briefly establish the connection from the gaze to formal sentiment, it exists as follows: beginning with the gaze, the subject's desire becomes apparent to them through the distortion of their visual field, instigating a temporary collapse between the Other and your eye, which ultimately leads to a destabilizing confrontation with one's lack. As I have previously formulated in my paper, formal sentiment is triggered by stimulating one's lack—between the comfort of the symbolic and the horror of the real.

The gaze and formal sentiment are also connected in a more intuitive sense—subjection to the gaze can be considered a strain of formal sentiment. As formal sentiment can be described as a sensation of stimulation, vibration, or movement, the gaze also involves the visual field *moving in front of your eyes*, as your visual field becomes distorted despite no actual physical movement happening in the picture. The movement, then, with the gaze, is the movement of form, and thus formal sentiment is inherent to being subject to the gaze.



I have a fondness for graphic abstraction, and in this section, I am calling for more engagement with this style of art. No other art style as effectively engages the tension between

form and content whilst combatting alienation by powerfully eliciting the gaze, and I will explain why in this section. I've shared some of my absolute favorite artworks with you in this section.

(Charline von Heyl, Vacancy (2017))

Graphic abstraction, moreso than expressionistic abstraction, effectively elicits the gaze—as it mimics the visual and linguistic logic of the symbolic world, yet “misses” it, or



seems to elude it. It is uncanny in sometimes a pleasurable way, and sometimes a disturbing way—in this way, works of graphic abstraction elicit the gaze. And, graphic abstraction is an excellent counter to alienated artmaking and artseeing.

(Charline von Heyl, Torpor (2016))

Similar to the ecstasy of the mirror stage in Lacan's seminar XI, graphic abstraction inexplicably and unabashedly captures things with solid delineations of color and

shape, giving the eye the ecstasy of complete line and shape. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* describes aesthetic feeling in a similar way: "it is astonishment vis-a-vis what is beheld...it is a being overwhelmed by what is aconceptual and yet determinate" (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 164).

The graphic element of graphic abstraction significantly reduces the anxiety and visual limbo of a canvas dominated by blurred and semi-present strokes—in a formal sense, but also a social sense. Graphic abstraction is more intuitive to trust and enjoy, whereas expressionistic

abstraction sometimes evokes cynicism in artseers' trust in the artist's genuinity and intention (of potentially capitalistic motivations of smug, elitist exclusion and glorified pleasure-restriction), because it is less forgiving to the viewer, giving them less to grasp onto, and a harder time doing it at that.

Thus, alienated artseeing and artmaking become less likely—graphic abstraction is more forgiving to the viewer, as well as the artist who is viewing as they create.

(Wangechi Mutu, Epiglotus III (2007))

Our eye is irremediably mediated through our gap into the symbolic world, however, this is exactly what makes formal sentiment possible. Rather than rejecting this innate condition and approaching the gap between the unconscious and conscious by offering the eye a canvas dominated by blurred strokes and flurries, graphic



abstraction, done well, often stimulates this gap far more effectively.

Giving the eye concrete shapes and simpler visual logic, it passes through the initial symbolic ring of the eye, penetrating further because it “relaxes” the anxious, agitated part of the eye that insists on making sense

of what it is seeing. After passing through the initial agitation of the symbolic requirement of the eye, it thus has more potency in reaching further into the split between the eye and the gaze, affording a stronger engagement of our formal sentiment.

(Wangechi Mutu, Second Born (2013))

(Lesley Vance, Untitled (2017))



To borrow Lacan’s words, I argue that graphic abstraction is more effective at granting the viewer the ability to “lay down their gaze,” as one “lays down their weapons.” (Lacan, Seminar XI, page 101) An immediate confrontation of incomprehensible strokes to the eye induces anxiety, triggers defense, and reinforces the socio-symbolic barrier of the eye, which is the opposite of “laying down one’s gaze.” (Lacan, Seminar XI, page 101).

Another way to think about it is that graphic abstraction, compared to expressionistic abstraction, experiences partial pleasure/displeasure on the viewer’s behalf, which thus provides a relief for the viewer that counterintuitively grants them more pleasure within the artwork. This is because graphic abstraction does the labor of translating the incomprehensible visual limbo within the split between the eye and the gaze—into something more palatable for the socio-symbolically mediated eye, and



“covers” the incomprehensible aspect on its own—relieving the viewer of this duty.

(Lesley Vance, Untitled, 2023)

(Charline von Heyl, P. (2008))



Although the viewer is relieved of this labor, they are not exempt from the reward it reaps, giving them the oftentimes pleasurable effect of interaction without requiring its labor (as the artwork does the labor for them). As Lacan writes, this can have a “calming” effect on the viewer, which I’d like to add has significant political implications for access to formal sentiment that counters alienation.

Works of graphic abstraction pass through the first hoop of the eye, initially

looking like a visual logic belonging to the symbolic world. However, upon closer glance, something about it is off—at a closer glance, the initially innocuous logic of the form seems to move. But by the time you realize this, the artwork has already reached past the socio-symbolic barrier of the eye, and now resides within your split. At this point, much more formal sentiment is possible and accessible to the viewer.

This is how works of graphic abstraction elicit the gaze. It initially mimics a visual logic familiar to the socio-symbolic conscious, then, once the guard of the gaze is "laid" down, it shifts. Now, it is not you who is looking at the artwork, but the artwork is now looking at you.

And, suddenly, a world of form has opened to you.

Conclusion

Although the relationship between formal sentiment and psychoanalytic theory may initially appear abstract or elusive, this impression only underscores its depth and pervasiveness across every sphere of genuine, unalienated engagement—not only with academic material but with art in all its forms. This challenge of understanding form is something I have personally wrestled with deeply: grappling with art, often thinking that I cannot belong to it. It was profoundly frustrating to feel closed off from a dimension of expression that holds such profound value across cultures and, particularly for me, within the academic world as a student. Whether acknowledged in its content or not, in the form that education takes, far too often students perceive engaging with diverse forms of work as necessarily alienated labor. Yet, this perception couldn't be further from the truth...the stakes of this issue reach deep into the psyche, beyond superficial class distinctions, with the potential to root psychoanalytic theory into formal sentiment itself. This would offer a radically unmediated, resonant connection to creative works, fostering a universal sense of authentic, unalienated connection. My god—this is a political reality.

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