

**Capitalism as a "Replacement" for Community:
Commodity Fetishism and Social Space Under Neoliberalism**

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Introduction

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre complicates the notion of space and its relation to the social in his chapter, "Social Space." Rather than existing as a *thing* that is "*a priori*" to institutions, Lefebvre finds space "bound up with the forces of production," in which its "reality" is, "at once formal and material"; space is a "*product* to be used, to be consumed," but, for Lefebvre, is also "*a means of production*."¹ With an active and retroactive relationship with social relationships, both affected by and affecting the social in an implicit manner, Lefebvre redefines space as "a set of relations between things (objects and products)."² It is with this contingent conception of *social space* that I wish to engage two contemporary theorists, Todd McGowan and Achille Mbembe, and their work on the mechanisms and effects of late capitalism, to conceive of the relationship between capitalism, desire, space, and the state of our social relation.

In *Capitalism and Desire*, Todd McGowan contends with how the regime of capitalism interacts with and exploits the nature of humans as subjects of desire under what he describes as "the capitalist fantasy," into an endless state of consumption.³ I will be drawing on three chapters from Todd McGowan's book: "The Subject of Desire and the Subject of Capitalism," "The Psychic Constitution of Private Space," and "The Market's Fetishistic Sublime," to exist in conversation with Lefebvre's work on social space, and to drive my paper's theoretical orientation toward three contemporary cultural phenomena I will elaborate on later.

¹ Lefebvre, Henri. "Social Space." *In The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 85.

² *Ibid.*, 83.

³ McGowan, Todd. "The Subject of Desire and the Subject of Capitalism." *In Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016, 25.

In *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe's chapter "Viscerality" underscores a cultural event under neoliberal capitalism which he describes as "the *return to animism*".⁴ In an age of what Mbembe calls an "Eros of consumption," he raises forth concerns on how modern developments stemming from neoliberal capitalism, technology, and social media engage in and enable a powerful fantasy of the commodity, to the detriment of the subject.⁵ As its relevance to McGowan's aforementioned work may already be apparent, I wish to portray both theorists' writings as an illustration of commodity fetishism and its effects on the modern subject of capitalism. When applied to Lefebvre, I wish to connect said capitalist subject's relation to the social space has become altered.

I am interested in engaging with these three theorists to explore how capitalist practices operate simultaneously as both cause and "solution" to the degradation of our community, of our communal public space - depleting us of human connection, and then, innocuously, offering a "replacement" for happiness. I will be supplementing my engagement with these theorists with three contemporary cultural phenomenons that serve as manifestations of these issues generated by modern capitalism: the "*Clean Girl Aesthetic*," a pervasive ideal and TikTok trend aimed at young women to be effortlessly minimalistic, feminine, and clean; the increasingly prevalent "*cult brand*," where consumers become obsessively devoted to a brand itself, buying an excess of its products for a purpose beyond practicality; and, lastly, the *automation of social interaction*, in which social decisions slowly become overtaken and automated by technological developments such as social media.

⁴ Mbembe, Achille. "Viscerality." In *Necropolitics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, 107.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

This paper will be divided into three main sections: the capitalist fantasy, an altered social space, and the simulation of community. My goal is to conceive of contemporary cultural phenomena in terms of the capitalist fantasy and commodity fetishism, and to uncover the hidden function that capitalist mechanisms serve in distorting and reconfiguring social space. Drawing on the relationships between Lefebvre's notion of social space, McGowan's work on capitalism and desire, and Mbembe's concept of the return of animism, I will ultimately argue that the regime of late capitalism has not only induced a recession of the social and a foreclosure of belonging, but that said issues are being covered up by the *simulation of community*, installed to both profit off of and "replace" the health of the social relations it has depleted. This simulation of community, responsible for what I will call an "altered social space," offers artificial relief from lack through the repeated act of consumption, and is mobilized by 'perfect' images offered up to the consumer by marketing campaigns and advertisements. Promising a rejuvenation of this lost belonging and sense of community, the advertisement's fantasmatic 'dome' of appearances, is just that - a *simulation*. Furthermore, I will argue that, under contemporary capitalism, Lefebvre's original notion of social space as a fluid interplay of materiality and sociality, becomes necessarily abstracted into that of *images and parasociality*. The broader social and political implications of this issue are clear: the hidden, ideological work of late-stage capitalism poses a severe threat to our community and renders subjects increasingly vulnerable to the interests of the corporation, as it has already been doing so.

Capitalist fantasy: The logic of desire under neoliberalism

A concept central to my paper is the capitalist fantasy, a psychoanalytic mechanism that organizes desire, is deployed in marketing, product design, and public spaces to regulate affect, direct attention, and produce a controlled form of social affirmation that is conditional, commodified, and artificial. In his chapter, "The Subject of Desire and the Subject of Capitalism," Todd McGowan describes the capitalist subject in *Capitalism and Desire* as one who: "constantly experiences its failure to belong, which is why the recurring fantasy within capitalism is that of attaining some degree of authentic belonging (in a romantic relationship, in a group of friends, in the nation, and so on)," and the key logic to the fantasy that capitalism creates, is that it "constantly militates against the fantasy's realization," the fantasy which, "offers the promise of belonging with every commodity," yet it remains a never-ending cycle of consumption, because "the subject can never buy the perfect commodity, or enough of them, to unlock the secret of belonging."⁶ Contemporary branding, advertising, and mediated consumer spaces exploit the vulnerabilities of desire and fantasy to structure social relations in the corporation's interest. Offering the illusion of connection and wholeness, the capitalist fantasy as a medium ensures that individuals remain hooked to the cycle of consumption.

In his "Viscerality" chapter in *Necropolitics*, Achille Mbembe writes on the neoliberal "Return to Animism" witnessed in our late stage capitalism. Animism, an old African tradition in which "attributes of animals, properties and plants and various animate and inanimate objects" were added to their "humanhood," was considered a "childhood of Man" and ultimately discounted by modern

⁶ McGowan, "The Subject of Desire and the Subject of Capitalism," 21.

culture.⁷ However, Mbembe argues, "Neoliberalism has created the conditions for a renewed convergence, and at times fusion, between the living human being and objects...which we can equate to a *return to animism*" (Mbembe 108). Under what he describes as "the empire of the digital and the Eros of consumption," Mbembe posits that "neoliberal capitalism, computational technologies, and social media all speak to some of the deepest fantasies that the modern human being entertains" (Mbembe 114). Although Mbembe doesn't include specific examples of this *return to animism* under this new "Eros of consumption," strong connections can be made between his concept of this 'fusion' between 'the living human being and objects' and *commodity fetishism*. In both Mbembe's return to animism and Karl Marx's commodity fetishism, the relationship between the subject and commodity becomes abstracted beyond practical utility value. I argue that the capitalist fantasy lends its mobility to this abstraction, and thus commodity fetishism and the capitalist fantasy have much to do with one another.

In the capitalist fantasy, a split psychoanalytic subject repetitively projects a fantasy of wholeness onto the commodity, both pleased and disappointed by its failure to provide wholeness for the subject; in commodity fetishism, the consumer's relation to the product becomes fractured and transformed into a fantasmatic image, alienated from both the reality of its creation and utility function. The image, or face of the commodity as signifier marks an important step shared by both the capitalist fantasy and commodity fetishism: the alienation from signifier and signified. This process of alienating the signifier from the signified, this abstraction, leaves any sort of reality principle behind, and reinvents

⁷ Mbembe, "Viscerality," 107.

an image for the subject to, frighteningly efficiently, project whatever it is they desire, onto the commodity as a 'perfect solution,' this face of wholeness borrowed one product at a time.

Now it might be clearer why I draw such a strong line between Mbembe's return to animism and McGowan's capitalist fantasy, and why Mbembe writes that such neoliberal developments and commodities, "speak to some of the deepest fantasies that the modern human being entertains."⁸ I do not wish to privilege one concept over the other, nor do I wish to make sense of them as two working parts in a complete image; I simply wish to point out how both concepts have much to do with one another, and much to do with commodity fetishism, whether or not they are reconcilable under a single framework. I will talk more about commodity fetishism in a later section; in the next section, I will discuss a specific manifestation of the capitalist fantasy: the "Clean Girl Aesthetic." Bear with me, this is a very interesting but convoluted cultural phenomenon, and its relation to the capitalist fantasy may not seem as immediate as a direct analogy, but is nevertheless an important and illuminating example to discuss.

The "Clean Girl Aesthetic" as a manifestation of the capitalist fantasy

"We've seen her before in 1990s Calvin Klein ads, in the paired down elegance of Carolyn Basset Kennedy, in the glossy pages of Glossier campaigns promising skin first, makeup second. Her current revival is part Sophia Richie wedding content, part Vogue wellness editorial, and part aspirational lifestyle TikTok, blending soft visuals with subtle signals of privilege and control" (Jane 1:23-1:48).

⁸ Ibid., 114.

"On TikTok, the clean girl isn't just about looking fresh. It's about living clean. She meal-preps kale salads and glass containers. She drinks lemon water first thing in the morning. Her skincare fridge is organized by serum type. Her apartment is awash in sunlight and her sheets are linen, always in neutral tones" (Jane 4:10-4:30).

"The woman behind the look is not trying to be seen. She already belongs. Her glow is natural, her beauty innate. Her life, a study of restraint. She doesn't need to prove anything." (Jane 15:08-15:44).

— Laura Jane, "The Clean Girl Aesthetic Was Never Clean."⁹

The "Clean Girl Aesthetic" is a trend that has overwhelmed millions of girls' TikTok and Instagram feeds, beginning around the pandemic. In her video essay, "The Clean Girl Aesthetic Was Never Clean: The Lie Behind It," Laura Jane describes the "Clean Girl," who "floats across our feeds like a soft whisper," as "Glassy skin, slick back bun, gold hoops catching the light just so. She's dressed in matching bathed athleisure. Her apartment is flooded with sunlight. And her morning routine includes journaling, jade rolling, and sipping ice matcha from a reusable glass tumbler. You know her already. She's the clean girl, and she's everywhere".¹⁰ Although videos that partake in this trend do not explicitly tell the audience to buy a certain product, the subliminal presence of the capitalist fantasy certainly pulses throughout in a hidden manner, via the images of a sublime, effortless, and feminine lifestyle, to which its respective audience's obsessive following can be attributed. Laura Jane's video essay argues that the 'Clean Girl Aesthetic' is no new cultural phenomenon, but rather a revival of the same "ideal" or "quietly luxurious fantasy" with "the illusion of ease, carefully packaged for mass consumption".¹¹

⁹ Jane, Laura. "The Clean Girl Aesthetic Was Never Clean: The Lie Behind It." *YouTube*, 14:34. Posted May 21, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tocbSd3NgFw>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 0:19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 0:51

The way in which Jane describes the *Clean Girl* through such detailed imagery is key to understanding its relation to the capitalist fantasy: the Clean Girl is but a series of images which have transcended past any reality principle, forming a fantasy of belonging to an *effortless*, soft and feminine state of wholeness: *she has always and already belonged*. But, as early mentioned, McGowan writes, regardless of how promising these images may be, "the subject can never buy the perfect commodity, or enough of them, to unlock the secret of belonging."¹² The important thing to note here is that advertising the commodity is never at the direct forefront of the presentation of the Clean Girl: it is implied through images which portray a life without lack, the "sunlight" which floods her apartment, the "reusable glass tumbler" which she sips her matcha from, the "matching athleisure" which enrobes her body, the "neutral tones" of linen on her bedsheets: none of these objects play a passive role – they are *precisely* what makes something like the *Clean Girl Aesthetic* so appealing – these 'objects,' functioning as the Lacanian *objet petit a*, are the seemingly perfect keys to actualizing the images taking place in front of the subject. Images of these commodities in *animation*, making modest appearances in *Clean Girl Aesthetic* content, are *exactly* what make this fantasy of wholeness seem attainable in the physical world, as they offer the subject something to grasp onto: the commodity, as *objet petit a*.¹³

I can also personally attest to the appeal of the *Clean Girl Aesthetic* – I have consumed this content for years; I have indeed wished to be the elusive *Clean Girl*, I have indeed bought the minimalistic reusable tumblers (several times), I have indeed bought the linen sheets, I have indeed bought the matching athleisure, I have indeed regretted disliking the taste of matcha, I have indeed

¹² McGowan, "The Subject of Desire and the Subject of Capitalism," 21.

¹³ I use the word *animation* to imply the Clean Girl Aesthetic's connection to Mbembe's return to animism.

bought the *Glossier* lipsticks and scrolled the *Reformation* website.¹⁴ And, I have, indeed, harbored the image of the elusive *Clean Girl* in my mind when desiring and ultimately purchasing these items. In the next section, I will write more about commodity fetishism, and you may find that the *Clean Girl Aesthetic's* fantasy of effortless femininity, through '*perfect product*' after '*perfect product*,' has much to do with commodity fetishism, and, Mbembe's return to animism.

Commodity fetishism and the simulation of community

As I have already touched a bit on commodity fetishism in the previous section, I wish to elaborate more on it now, and additionally examine its role in what I describe as a *simulation of community* under capitalism.

Let me first elaborate on commodity fetishism. Lefebvre continues on to write on commodity fetishism in "Social Space" as theorized by Karl Marx to analyze how objects and advertisements appear autonomous, masking relations of labor and social exploitation: "Objects hide something very important," that is, "Products and the circuits they establish (in space) are fetishized and so become more 'real' than reality itself – that is, than productive activity itself, which they thus take over," and so we may "reveal (social) relationships via the "successful unmasking of things".¹⁵ A key takeaway here is the alienation between the image of the product and awareness of its physical reality, not unlike the psychic alienation undergone by the psychoanalytic subject. Secondly, this proportional relationship

¹⁴ I mention and elaborate on these specific brands in the later section, *Parasocial relationships with the "Cult Brand."*

¹⁵ Lefebvre, "Social Space," 81.

between 'unmasking objects' and 'revealing social relationships' is also important - as I will be arguing how our social space, and thus social relation, has become distorted under contemporary neoliberalism, and will be grounding this argument in my 'unmasking' of the *new* fetishization of the commodity.

In the chapter "The Market's Fetishistic Sublime," McGowan provides a key connection between commodity fetishism and the psychoanalytic subject's capitalist fantasy, through what he calls the *sublimity* of the commodity form. He writes: "The sublimity of the commodity acts as the hidden source of satisfaction for both producers and consumers in the capitalist system...The commodity **form** is sublime, not the particular content of the commodity...The commodity embodies the promise of an ultimate satisfaction or enjoyment that would transport the consumer beyond the secular world, a promise that no commodity will ever fulfill".¹⁶ Furthermore, McGowan emphasizes the role of the advertisement as responsible for imbuing the commodity with sublimity: "the advertisement is more important than the product...[advertisements] are actually the site of our satisfaction with the commodities we consume...the advertisement is the source of that sublimity."¹⁷ The visibility of the advertisement, arguably a 'series of images' alienated from their context in reality, resurfaces Lefebvre's emphasis on the importance of 'unmasking' the fetishized object. In other words, the advertisement *is* the mask, *is* the original incubator of fantasmatic images without reality, into objects for consumption. Indeed, "No one advertises a commodity by showing how it will anchor one in the drudgery of daily life," unless, of course, 'drudgery' becomes a new aesthetic (perhaps of masculinity or selfless duty), in

¹⁶ McGowan, "The Market's Fetishistic Sublime," 222-224.

¹⁷ Ibid., 224-225.

which its images of 'drudgery,' ironically, become 'unanchored' from the actual reality of said drudgery itself.¹⁸

At this point I will introduce what *the simulation of community* has to do with commodity fetishism. Under contemporary capitalism, I argue that commodity fetishism distorts beyond the masking of objects: *it simulates the community function*. As we know, what results from commodity fetishism is the feeling that a subject's identity is recognized and affirmed (a community function), however, *parasociality* (a variation of the community function) *also* makes an interesting appearance amidst the progression of neoliberalism and "social" media. In parasociality, a subject typically experiences an intimate attachment or social relationship with a social media personality or fictional character who has no real interaction with said subject. In this section, I will illustrate how parasociality involves itself with *commodity fetishism* to simulate the community function. This is more clearly articulated via a cultural phenomenon I have chosen to include in this paper: *the cult brand*.

Parasocial relationships with the "cult brand"

The "cult brand," closely associated with the "Clean Girl Aesthetic," is a modern cultural phenomenon that arose a few years before the pandemic, and is largely targeted toward middle to upper class white women (or those who wish to associate with that culture). Although there are multiple niches in which cult brands have their respective followers, some of the most notable of this phenomenon is makeup's *Glossier*, fashion's *Reformation*, and grocery's *Erewhon*, the products of these

¹⁸ Ibid., 225

same brands often seen or implied in much of "Clean Girl Aesthetic" content. Tess Robinson and Elodie Kongasiou describe the extent of *Erewhon's* grasp on its shoppers and how it has managed to 'morph' beyond its grounding in practicality in their *Substack* essay, "The Cult Brand Formula: Decoded:"

"Once a niche health food co-op, Erewhon has morphed into a lifestyle monolith — a byword for a certain type of rarefied self-optimisation. It's not just a grocery store, it's a *mise en scène* for a curated, collagen-boosted life. A living, breathing billboard for \$500 juicers and custom mushroom powders, and as *The Cut* once put it, an allure so strong, people will hold down three jobs just to afford to shop there."

— Tess Robinson and Elodie Kongasiou, "The Cult Brand Formula: Decoded."¹⁹

The "cult brand," which is by no means a negative connotation, and is in fact proudly touted by these brands, essentially engages its followers in a parasocial relationship, where, despite the brand being a nonhuman entity with no real interaction with its subjects, followers of the cult brand experience a deep emotional investment and intimacy with that specific brand(s). I argue that, under modern capitalism, the parasocial relationship, typically associated with a social media influencer, has abstracted into a parasocial relationship with *the brand itself*.

Robinson and Kongasiou continue on to describe the logic of the cult brand: "There's always an 'us.' And there's definitely a 'not-us.' Cult brands define their audience so clearly. They don't pretend to be for everyone. They give you symbols, be it a tote, a glazed-skin glow or a beige non-stick pan, that say: I get it. I belong here. The result is a kind of commercial intimacy. A brand that doesn't just

¹⁹ Robinson, Tess, and Elodie Kongasiou. "The Cult Brand Formula: Decoded." *Smack Bang (Substack)*, May 27, 2025. Accessed Nov 6, 2025.

understand your aesthetic but seems to share your worldview. And for everyone on the outside looking in, it becomes something to aspire to."²⁰ At this point the relationship between the cult brand and the capitalist fantasy becomes clear: the cult brand offers a sense of '*commercial intimacy*' for the subject via the grasping of these '*symbols*,' or '*images*,' to match the language I was using earlier, which promises said subject to '*belong here*,' to become one of '*us*,' just as how the Clean Girl '*already belongs*.' It's a powerful and compelling force, indeed.

This parasociality, or '*commercial intimacy*,' coincides with a recession of the social, which I will elaborate on in a later section, *The automation of social interaction*. The parasocial relationship developed between consumer and cult brand is, in many ways, fulfilling a 'community function' and aims to 'replace the community' as neoliberal capitalism simultaneously causes the recession of the social. Of course, this is not at all actually fulfilling the function of a community, but rather serves as an addictive alternative for the gaping lack of identity and cultural unity that capitalism's "privatization of space," as mentioned by McGowan, had steered toward to begin with (I will elaborate more on this 'privatization' in the next section).²¹ Capitalism functions both as the problem and the 'solution' in the scenario, both of these functions hidden to the consumer. What emerges, then, as a result, is not only a *recession of the social*, but a *simulation of community* under capitalism, generated and conducted by the corporation.

In her essay, "Why Reformation's 'Official Boyfriend' Campaign is Pure Genius," Joann Shin

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ McGowan, "The Psychic Constitution of Private Space," 51.

examines a specific marketing campaign from one of the most prominent fashion cult brands, Reformation, titled the "Official Boyfriend" campaign, and why it is 'pure genius.' In this campaign, Pete Davidson (a hugely relevant cultural icon and source of desire for his internet audience), has become *your official boyfriend*. Shin writes, "Reformation isn't just selling a product — they're selling a whole vibe. They've made Pete the *official* boyfriend of Reformation. Not only is he an ideal partner for a sustainable shopping journey, but it also reaffirms the brand as the perfect companion for your wardrobe."²² And, choosing Pete Davidson as your 'Official Boyfriend,' was no accident on Reformation's part, Shin notes: "Pete Davidson has kind of become the *official* boyfriend of the internet, right? I mean, the guy has been engaged to Ariana Grande, dated Kim Kardashian, and had a fling with Emily Ratajkowski — basically every high-profile woman you can think of."²³ Through association with these 'high-profile' women, the most prominent and culturally affirmed '*Clean Girls*' in a way, Reformation's campaign gestures toward the consumer with a *very* attractive promise, almost implying, '*you could be comparable to Ariana Grande, or Kim Kardashian, or Emily Ratajowski, because now Pete's your boyfriend, too.*' This campaign is quite literally a parasocial relationship with the brand as 'Boyfriend' — it is an even more concrete representation of the parasocial relationship the brands have been pursuing with their consumers, beyond the product — a sense of affirmation, identity, community, and ultimately, love. But, of course, Pete Davidson's position as *Your Official Boyfriend* is confined to the advertising campaign, and this sense of *commercial intimacy* with Reformation is not truly cultivating the community function it seems to promise. Made up of appearances, similar to its

²² Shin, Joann. "Why Reformation's 'Official Boyfriend' Campaign Is Pure Genius." *Marketing in the Age of Digital* (Medium), March 2, 2025. Accessed Nov 6, 2025.

²³ *Ibid.*

fetishized commodities, this sense of community installed by capitalism is effectively a *simulation*.

An altered social space

What arises from the conversation between Lefebvre's notion of *Social Space* and McGowan and Mbembe's work on the relationship between desire and neoliberalistic capitalism, is what I'd like to call an "*altered social space*." The combination of the capitalist regime and the chokehold it has on its subjects manifests into the spatial, namely a "privatization" of Lefebvre's "social space," which I will expand on in this section.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre writes that social space is not "a thing among other things, nor a product among other products," but instead "subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity".²⁴ He continues to write that, "space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things (objects and products)".²⁵ Furthermore, Lefebvre warns against "fetish[izing] space in a way reminiscent of the old fetishism of commodities, where the trap lay in exchange, and the error was to consider 'things' in isolation, as 'things in themselves'."²⁶ Not only can space not be considered a stagnant 'thing in itself,' Lefebvre also complicates the notion of space and its simultaneous configuration in both physical space and social relations, positing, "there is no sense in which space can be treated solely as an *a priori* condition of these institutions...is space a social relationship? Certainly – but one which is inherent to property relationships...and also closely

²⁴ Lefebvre, "Social Space," 73.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

bound up with the forces of production...here we see the polyvalence of social space, its 'reality' at once formal and material. Though a product to be used, to be consumed, it is also a means of production."²⁷

I wish to emphasize Lefebvre's social space as actively *and* retroactively reconfiguring both the formal and material phenomenologies of space, constantly informing and re-informing not only the objective practice of sociality, but our fundamental orientation to what sociality is in our culture. In other words, space is not *just* a social relationship as Lefebvre states: it *also* exists within the materiality and practicality of our physical world, *and, in addition, constantly* reorients and shapes the relation between sociality and materiality in its own right. It is at once created and *creating*, a physical substance *and* an invisible force, not at all unlike the subject's fetishistic relation to commodities or Mbembe's depiction of the modern consumer as reviving an *animistic* relationship to objects under neoliberalism.

In his chapter "The Psychic Constitution of Private Space," McGowan illustrates the movement, propelled by capitalism, from *public* to *private* space. McGowan writes, "tendency toward privatization has grown exponentially and today threatens the very existence of a public space or of a commons".²⁸ The capitalist regime is able to successfully steer mass populations toward this movement because it exploits the vulnerabilities of our structure of desire as subjects. Under capitalism, "the capitalist subject imagines itself dissatisfied because it imagines itself constantly overcoming obstacles to arrive at the object, but in fact the obstacles are the object."²⁹ McGowan continues, "The more

²⁷ Ibid., 85.

²⁸ McGowan, "The Psychic Constitution of Private Space," 51.

²⁹ Ibid., 63

subjects become subjects of capitalism, the more they turn away from public space and seek refuge in their private worlds. Even when capitalism requires that subjects interact with each other in relations of production, distribution, and consumption, it demands that they do so as private beings."³⁰

The problem here isn't necessarily the presence of private space, but rather its encroachment on the public. McGowan writes, "We create private worlds through the act of exclusion: private property is available only to its owners; private clubs are reserved only for members; and private discussions occur among an isolated few. Capitalism doesn't create privacy, but the development of capitalism necessarily coincides with an increasing turn to private worlds."³¹ What results, then, is the depletion of third spaces and a commons, a blow to the health of our social relations, and thus the need for an alternative to the depleted community function. Relief (and addiction) is found through consumption, via the commodity, *reanimated* and fetishized, and the cult brand it belongs to, a dome of appearances that seems to promise, you, too, may leave the three-dimensional, political world and become one of these perfect images. What ensues is an illusion of community is maintained while further displacing subjects into McGowan's notion of the *private space*. The displaced capitalist subject, with access to only the private space, now confronts a destroyed public space and a depleted sense of community. It is through a generated world of appearances: 'genius' marketing campaigns, beautiful graphic design, and aestheticized social media content, *just for you*, that the capitalist regime then comes back in a sinister manner to 'simulate' what it has depleted - an *alternative* to community, the *altered* social space.

³⁰ Ibid., 51

³¹ Ibid., 52

In Lefebvre's notion of social space, lines between materiality and sociality, product and production, become blurred. Through the privatization of space as theorized by McGowan, a physical commons becomes encroached on by the prioritization of capitalism mechanisms. This privatization malnourishes both the original 'materiality' and 'sociality' of our social space – what comes in as *replacement* in our contemporary landscape is an excessive mediation of said 'materiality' and 'sociality.' Our contemporary social space, *the altered social space*, thus becomes forced into an abstracted relationship of *images and parasociality*, a mediated distortion of Lefebvre's original notion of social space. In the altered social space, sociality becomes mediated into *parasociality*, materiality into *images*, and any fulfillment of needs that would originally be met by the existence of a commons must be filtered through private means.³² In the next section, I will briefly discuss an instance of this, *the automation of social interaction*, and how it contributes to the altered social space.

The automation of social interaction

In the *New York Times* article "How Tech Created a Recipe for Loneliness," Brian Chen writes how "an overreliance on text messaging, which superseded phone calls as the most-used communication method on phones many years ago, could contribute to loneliness if people weren't genuinely connecting with one another".³³ Under contemporary technological developments and the prevalence of so-called "social" media, social interaction becomes less and less human, and increasingly

³² For example, see Los Angeles' Tea at Shiloh, a luxury teahouse which charges guests by the hour to come sip tea, relax, and engage in the "practice of connection through community," and requires a reservation through their website (teaatshiloh.com).

³³ Chen, Brian X. "How Tech Created a 'Recipe for Loneliness.'" *The New York Times*, November 10, 2024.

mediated – from direct conversation into phone calls, into text messages, into emojis, into 'liking' a post, into simply reposting an existing post from another account. In this way, social interactions, once meaningful and direct, become 'offloaded' onto automated and commercial systems. The 'loneliness epidemic' has a direct correlation with the uptick in usage of technologies (such as social media) which provide automated social interactions in lieu of a more direct sociality contextualized by a public space. Not only is this a 'solution' for socialization in the midst of a declining public commons, but it is also the *cause* of said declining public commons. 'Social' media becomes a *private alternative* to public sociality, in which the 'social' is nowhere in sight, lost in the algorithmic automation of such interaction. In some ways, the term 'social media' does not lie: it is indeed a mediated sociality.

The automation of social activity is no minor modification; it fundamentally changes the nature of their social character, which builds upon itself to fundamentally alter contemporary social relations. This, in turn, alters our sense of social space and draws the depleted community's pulsing need for a 'replacement'. Although mediation has no inherently destructive qualities, excessive mediation of social interaction contributes hugely to our 'recession of the social.' It is no mystery, then, why a social space traditionally consisting of sociality and materiality becomes distorted under contemporary capitalism; in the face of our recessing sociality, homeostasis is maintained in the social space by resorting to images and mediation.

Conclusion

Amidst a social landscape contextualized by unprecedented consumption, loneliness, and lack of physical community, we mustn't remain complacent in our vulnerability to the corporation as capitalist subjects. A key gesture in this paper is the emphasis of the convoluted, retroactive-active relation between 'cause' and 'solution,' or 'harm' and 'relief,' and it is this kind of tolerance for complexity we must hold in regards to sustaining a humane quality of life. Enjoyment is indispensable for the subject, but its presentation and origin are not necessarily neutral. I do not wish to romanticize a previous, 'less-capitalistic' era as an impossible ideal; subjectivity has always been a complex and delicate issue. However, we are not unconditional victims of the capitalist regime simply because it has managed to exploit the nature of our unassuming subjectivities.

Through actively engaging with and embracing our subjectivity and reality rather than appeasing both as conveniently as possible, immense political opportunities exist without the need for an explicit overthrowing of such neoliberal hegemonies. An active landscape of sociality and materiality has not 'objectively' been depleted; it exists insofar as we cultivate and provide room for it within the accumulation of our repeated acts as subjects. This accumulation of semi-agential acts, has immense power to, just as the capitalist regime has immense power to, transform and shape the substances *and* the forces *created by* and *creating*, our social space.

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