

—— Brian Benjamin Hansen, »The Ideology of consumption or, What does it mean to live in a tasteless world?«

—— A B S T R A C T ———

This article opts for a return to a critique of the ideology of consumption. Following Slavoj Žižek it argues that what must be addressed in present-day consumer-capitalism is the level of the superego. Superego is not about living up to certain norms/standards; rather, superego fits consumerism quite well, in that it is the injunction, even obligation, to go beyond any norms or standards and enhance enjoyment. The article attempts, through a diagnosis of postmodern ways of eating and consuming, a new metaphorization of consumer-capitalism as »tasteless«: We live, basically, in a tasteless world where desires and tastes must be reinvented continuously, and we are trapped in the tastelessness of this same world, caught in the matrix of consumption, whatever we do.

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■—THE IDEOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION OR, WHAT
DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE IN A TASTELESS WORLD?—■

■— Research into the ideology of consumption has, of course, been a major part of critical thinking since the Frankfurt School. Recently, however, analysis of the ideology of consumption has been labeled »old-fashioned«. It is old-fashioned to talk about consumers being tricked and brainwashed by clever marketers. Today, the trend is to talk about how consumers create and comport themselves in different social contexts and spheres of practical reason, rather than about how this also entails control. For example, in her much praised book, *Consumer Culture*, a modern classic for the practice-oriented research into consumption, Roberta Sassatelli opts for research in the area of »the empirical, contested and ambivalent unfolding of social practices«.¹ Energy is thus not put into a discussion of the meaning of the world of consumption at large, but rather into a discussion of the meaning that – for the different actors/consumers involved – can be found *in* the world of consumption. There is thus an implicit acceptance of the fact that in many life-spheres today we are interpellated as consumers. Maybe the finest expression of this resignation is found in the success of the TV-series *Mad Men*, which revolves around the very beginning of the era of commercialism. There is an undertone of sex, lust and a strange *tristesse*, even combining into some sort of decadence at the brink of ruin. It is as if the series shows us how no one believed in the new aggressive consumer-capitalism from the very beginning, but how it survived nonetheless, and how today we seemingly can do nothing but adjust to it.

The thesis of the following article is that there is good reason to reinvent a critique of ideology, especially when it comes to the domain of consumption. Not, however, on the Marxist premise of »they know not what they do«, but in an approach that aims at an understanding of what we openly, knowingly do, but are somehow still incapable of changing. This entails a shift in perspective, namely from consumer-capitalism seen as a consistent strategy on behalf of the capitalist class, to consumption as an ideology dispersed over a whole cultural-political field/world (the western world), and which somehow survives, even if we all more or less know that something is rotten in it. In order to unfold this thesis I rely on, and develop,

a certain version of Slavoj Žižek's critique of ideology, which works at the general level of the »world« today, and which focuses on the level of superego within it: We do not maintain the present world because we are tricked into believing that it is consistent but, on the contrary, because, even though we know it is inconsistent, we still cannot find the courage to act, and thus internalize the inconsistency of capitalism in the form of a malignant superego. This is, in short, what Žižek refers to as today's stupid superego injunction to enjoy.

— FROM WORLDLESS ... —

»Do we still live in a world?« This is the title of one of the sections of Žižek's *The Parallax View* – a quick reaction to the publication of Alain Badiou's major work *Logics of Worlds* (both published in 2006). Žižek wonders about Badiou's shift from his thoughts on ontology in *Being and Event* to his focus on the phenomenology of worlds in the *Logics of Worlds*:

— Why did Badiou start to elaborate this topic of world, the »logic of worlds«? What if the impetus came from his deeper insight into capitalism? What if the concept of world was necessitated by the need to think the unique status of the capitalist universe as worldless? Badiou has claimed that our time is *devoid of world* – how are we to grasp this strange thesis? [...] Perhaps this is where we should locate the »danger« of capitalism: although it is global, encompassing all worlds, it sustains a *strictu sensu* »worldless« ideological constellation, depriving the great majority of people of any meaningful »cognitive mapping«.²

It is today not possible to situate oneself meaningfully in capitalism, Žižek seems to be arguing. As consumers we are at the same time *here*, consuming, and mystically *there* (somewhere in the third world), where the things that we consume are produced. We are both workers and indirectly capitalists through our investment of money on the financial market (e.g. in pension funds). We cannot find a position from which we can cognize the new global, complex interconnectedness of capitalism, because we are deeply intertwined with it, and yet still very insecure about our precise role in it. Capitalism is in this sense some kind of self-organizing principle, but run amok. What we thought was self-organizing is also to some extent self-destructive when it comes to rationales, visions for the future, etc. Furthermore, is there not something suspicious about the fact that we have very great difficulties grasping our own time, using vague concepts such as »postmodernism« or »late capitalism«? Our time is simply »post« or »late«, it comes

after something else, but we are not able to say more about it. It is as if our time is somehow running in many directions at once, but seemingly with no firm idea/rationale; that is, no consistent vision of the world.

Žižek has, prior to his discussion with Badiou, been formulating the question of the worldless world in Lacanian terms. In Lacan, the question of the world is the question of the symbolic framework underpinning our shared social reality – in one term: the big Other. The question of the postmodern world, where the majority of people are deprived of cognitive mapping, is then the question of the disintegrating big Other. What can be elaborated from the basis of Žižek's work is that the worldless capitalist world or the disintegrating big Other means *two* things, which should be understood as *one* paradox: When the big Other disintegrates, the result is confusion and the emergence of the so-called reflexive society, where daily routines and traditional identities and rationales are constantly renegotiated, and where *at the same time* there is the permanence of something that we almost never question, namely the logic of Capital itself. With Žižek and Lacan we can almost formalize the diagnosis with the concepts of the big Other and *objet a*: The disintegration of the big Other does not automatically lead to the »fall of the big Other« and thus to emancipation; rather, it today means that something *remains* at the center of disintegration, namely (not the big Other, but) the small object, *objet petit a*. The *objet a* is a mere placeholder of the void; that is, on the edge of inconsistency. *Objet a* as the cause of desire is not something substantial (it is not a car or a burger, but the very *reason* that I want a car or a burger), and it is thus rather the very fantasy-frame sustaining a certain »way« of desiring (e.g. »consumerism«). The *objet a* is at the same time what ignites the shift from desire to drive: From desire-generating fantasy-frame to point of the circling of the drive, to repetition compulsion. What this amounts to is that we mystically still have an »object-cause of desire« in spite of the disintegrating Other. In other words, what is important when we discuss postmodernism or late capitalism is the level of libidinal investment that upholds our subjective being and our enjoyment in this »world«, even though it is disintegrating.

We have here a genuine paradox, something that really should surprise us: If (late) capitalism is the name for the world that is »worldless«, why do we even cling to it? Why do we not simply invent »another world«? It is not that we, sometimes, do not wish for another world. But as Žižek puts it, quite precisely, »[...] this is our situation today, after the breakdown of the Marxist notion that capitalism itself generates the force that will destroy it in the guise of the proletariat, none of the critics of capitalism, none of those who describe so convincingly the deadly vortex into which the so-called process of

globalization is drawing us, has any well-defined notion of how we can get rid of capitalism«. ³ So, the irony of this situation is that the great »vanishing mediator« in history, namely capitalism – dissolving all holy bonds, melting everything solid into air (only to prepare for new »good« bonds and ways of producing/consuming) – is deferring to play this role of mere mediator. What we have is »a contingent monstrous formation whose very 'normal' state is a permanent dislocation, a kind of 'freak of history', a social system caught in the vicious superego cycle of incessant expansion«. ⁴

The gist of Žižek's diagnosis above can be articulated as follows: What if we can explain the success of capitalism precisely because, *in not being a world*, it to some extent »purifies« *objet a*? What if capitalism is a formation that simply gives us a cause of desire, a *mode-de-jouir*, in the form of consumerism with no limits, with no morals/values, with no obligations, with nothing to live up to? In psychoanalysis, *objet a* is the name for that *something extra*, that something we as speaking, socially initiated (that is, castrated) subjects cannot get hold of, but which none the less haunts us and sits in certain partial-objects. The idea then is to say that capitalism in this sense is *not* what alienates/castrates us; consumer-capitalism is not a symbolic world in the classical sense, as some kind of »cutting to size« of the subject, according to (paternal) Law, Tradition, or whatever. On the contrary, capitalism is the name for the symptom-formation allowing us to reconnect with the lost object, the *jouissance* that we had to give up to emerge as subjects. This is the success of capitalism: It is not some kind of well-founded symbolic order (and thus at least minimally open to critique on the level of language and reasoning), it is another kind of order, namely order at the level of *objet a*. We could say in a slightly elusive formula that it is a »non-castrating castration«. Capitalism does not take responsibility for the loss of anything; rather, it incites us to seek the *objet a* everywhere, all the time. This is the basis for the development of a cruel superego that does not simply say, »Obey!«, as is commonly believed, but which whispers: »Obey – *your thirst!*«; »Enjoy!«; »Just do it!«; »*Carpe Diem!*«; »Because you're worth it!«; »Enjoy what you are doing«, etc. However, capitalism is still castration – we will not get the *objet a*; what we will get is a way to circle around it. In this way we still have a non-castrating *castration*, a worldless world.

Defending this thesis, one can rely on the contours of a diagnosis that Žižek has propagated throughout the years, for example in *The Plague of Fantasies*, *The Ticklish Subject* and *The Parallax View*. What Žižek outlines in these books is a diagnosis that connects the situation of a disintegrating world to the point in it which can still be said to »remain the same«, namely the functioning of Capital. ⁵ In short, Žižek outlines two

consequences of the disintegration of the world or big Other. The first consequence is the rise of the »risk society« – a society of opaqueness, instability, uncertainty as regards one’s actions and choices – and thus the »reflexivity« of this society: the way everything constantly has to be renegotiated.⁶ The second consequence is the continued pulsation of capitalism, »the spectral presence of Capital« and the fact that »today’s subject is perhaps more than ever caught in an inexorable compulsion that effectively runs his life.«⁷ However, what must be added to Žižek’s analysis (or emphasized in it) is that these two consequences of the disintegration of the big Other are deeply intertwined: On the one hand the situation of complete instability/multiplicity and on the other hand the symptom-formation allowing us to uphold ourselves in repetition/oneness. Capitalism is, once again, the name of incessant innovation, fluctuation, new ways to generate desire etc., *and yet at the same time* the very form or neutral background for our lives that we very rarely question.

— ... TO TASTELESS —

I take it that consumerism is to some extent the ultimate example of the worldless character of the world today. I thus propose to elaborate further into the character of the wordless world by metaphorically changing wordless to »tasteless«. The word »tasteless« has the gain of closely tying together the two features of the world today that I have described so far, namely that it is an instance of instability/multiplicity *and* repetition/oneness: We live in a tasteless world, a world which has no predefined taste; it is up to each of us, as consumers, to invent our own taste, our own style of consuming and eating. And at the same time we live in a *tasteless*, disgusting world that in a certain repetitive fashion urges us to more consumption.

Let me briefly elaborate this diagnosis: We constantly find a cause of desire in consumption, but this consumption is going nowhere, it does not entail any consistent vision of the world. In a worldless world, every ordinary daily task becomes an exercise in self-reflexivity – since the frame of meaning is gone, new ways of living together, eating, etc., must be constantly invented. We eat and consume without security in the Other, which is why we must constantly invent new standards, new measures. The world in itself is simply tasteless, just an empty frame for our activities and choices. The world is tasteless, but it is also the scene for the constant reinvention of taste and the confusion of a multitude of new tastes to choose from. At the same time the world is tasteless in the other sense of the word: disgusting, despicable. Being confronted with the *objet a*, without the possibility of analyzing and confronting it (e.g. by fighting for »another world«), gives us a sense of an unpleasant

superego machine at work. Now that we can have it all, we cannot but feel that we should take it all. We should enjoy life in every aspect, we should get the most out of our lives, and this induces powerful feelings of guilt in us. The first time in history that excess is simply permitted, we begin to feel the weight of this excess and the potential humiliation of our freedom it entails. We consume under the spell of the superego, but at the same time we see that our way of life is what is about to destroy the world (through overconsumption), or what is simply indifferent to any thought of the world (be it in the register of Nature, Reason, Justice, etc.).

To be sure, phrasing the question of consumption and capitalism in psychoanalytic terms gives us, I think, a completely new perspective on this subject-matter. Psychoanalysis is not a moral discourse about restraining enjoyment, but neither (contrary to what most people think) is it about »unleashing« inhibited drives or the like. Psychoanalysis is rather about analyzing and questioning how we humans enjoy and how we humans very often find ourselves in deadlocks of enjoyment. For example, how we live our lives with the strange feeling that something is not quite right, that things could have been otherwise, but how we still uphold this life – how we still derive (some) enjoyment from it. This is at the core of psychoanalysis, in the words of Jacques Lacan:

— It is clear that those with whom we deal, the patients, are not satisfied, as one says, with what they are. And yet, we know that everything they are, everything they experience, even their symptoms, involves satisfaction. [...] They are not content with their state, but all the same, being in a state that gives so little content, they are content.⁸

So, from the perspective of psychoanalysis, we do not have to choose between the alternative of good old castration (the reconstruction of the world through a new big Other) and the wild unleashing of the drives, for example in the superego-modes of *jouissance* of late capitalist consumption. I think that with psychoanalysis one could say that capitalism first of all *is* emancipating in that to some extent it means »the fall of the big Other«. However, psychoanalysis wants to push us further than a new ideological closure on the superego-machine of consumption. In the end, it is precisely the pressure of the superego from which psychoanalysis offers us liberation.⁹

— THE PLAGUE OF FANTASIES —

Browsing through the world of consumption today, it is possible to defend the thesis that desire has entered the age of reflexivity, and that we see new features of desire today that

were only potentially there before. We can see this at the level of what Lacan calls »fantasy« – the function through which, in social contexts, we *learn how to desire*.¹⁰

Fantasy often has a certain »freezing« function. Fantasy points out *certain* desirable things; in this manoeuvre, it effectively closes or freezes my relation to the Other. *This* is what the Other wants me to desire. *This* is how I should behave to satisfy the Other. However, it is this freezing function of fantasy that we should question. When the big Other disintegrates, fantasy also to some extent disintegrates – it becomes harder and harder to defend certain traditional ways of desiring, behaving, eating, thinking about oneself, etc. This does not mean, however, that fantasy now fades away, allowing us to see things *as they really are*, allowing us to penetrate the lack in the Other; on the contrary, fantasy now becomes an even more feverish production of images to protect us from this lack, as we seem to be approaching it. This is precisely Žižek's take on fantasy in *The Plague of Fantasies*. There is an overabundance of pseudo-concrete imagery in today's audio-visual media¹¹ – at the same time overwhelming and protective.

In the age of reflexivity, ordinary, daily routines are destabilized. We cannot simply eat, since we are unsure whether we are eating in the right way (healthy enough, good enough). Eating today is deconstructed in several ways. In general we have the situation of the »freedom of choice« and the brave new world of opportunities for consumption – drinking a cup of coffee, for example, is no easy business as there is no generic cup of Coffee, but a multitude of coffee-experiences and a barista (the curator of the coffee-shop) to guide us through our palette of choices. Renata Salecl has wittily shown how visiting a cheese-shop can turn into a very anxiety-provoking experience, as one confronts the vast array of choices and a cheese expert-salesman that one cannot really trust.¹² Also at the level of the everyday situation of providing for oneself and buying one's basic foodstuffs, however, we have a situation where we cannot trust the products on the shelves – food is today highly processed, and since no one is in charge of the general effects of this processed food on us, analyses of the »risk society« come to the forefront. Lastly, do we not find self-reflexivity in almost its pure form at the high-end (the costly end) of the spectrum of consumption, in so-called »molecular gastronomy«, which completely deconstructs what we should understand by food/taste?

So, in different layers and situations in modern consumption there is a sense that the big Other is lacking. However, this lack is fought with new, desire-generating fantasies. The plague of fantasies means that fantasy collaborates with or feeds on the creativity of desire and on the transgressive features of desire. And this is desire in the age of reflexivity. Tastelessness is fought with an abundance of new tastes, experiences, experiments.

However, what happens if fantasy breaks down? Here, we slowly get to the topic of the tasteless, disgusting. The thesis is that when the big Other is disintegrating, this does not only leave us with a feeling that the world has become tasteless, that there is no taste in it, and that we have to reinvent taste. It also – this is the thesis – leaves us with the strange feeling that even though the big Other radically does not exist, we are still not free or, rather, we still do not embrace our freedom. There is – enigmatically – not only freedom in the worldless world; there is also repetition compulsion. The world is thus, at the same time, tasteless – a neutral frame for our idiosyncratic whims and desires – and *tasteless*, despicable, disgusting, repulsive, nauseating. What we sense is thus in the end the *jouissance* of the superego machine of capitalist consumerism, the *real* cause of our desire. We do our best to repress this disgusting side of the world with our endless phantasmatic scenarios, but again and again it cannot but surface. This is when we suddenly feel the severity of the superego, commanding *jouissance* from us.

— MATRIX AND JOUISSANCE —

I want to conclude by illustrating our predicament using a fictional example, which shows how it is possible to take different subjective stances or positions confronting the disintegrating world and the fall of the big Other, and what this means in terms of consumption.

In the 1999 sci-fi blockbuster *The Matrix* there are at least three interesting eating situations. First we have the most well-known eating situation in the film, namely the traitor Cypher's meal at the restaurant with the enemy, Agent Smith. Agent Smith is a computer program, working inside the larger computer program the Matrix, created by the machines that have taken control over humans. Humans are held captive, but tricked into believing that they still live free and happy lives inside the Matrix (which functions as an ideological illusion that keeps humans from rioting). Cypher is one of a group of rebels who have managed to liberate themselves from the Matrix and battle against the machines in the »real« world. But it is this battle that is beginning to wear Cypher, down, which is why he wishes to be »reinserted«. This is done in a fancy restaurant, with perfect lighting and music in the background. Cypher is taking a bite from his steak:

— Cypher: You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? [*Takes a bite of steak*] Ignorance is bliss.

We have here an instance of fantasy in a basic Lacanian sense. Fantasy is not about certain predefined »good« things (steaks, ice-cream, strawberry, whatever), because the problem is to know how to desire these things at all.¹³ Radically, the steak does not exist. The steak is produced from the following subjective attitude: If the Other (the Matrix) says so (that the steak is juicy and delicious), then that is how it is. The features of the steak are created by the Matrix. Cypher is sick and tired of the freedom outside the Matrix and wants to be put back into the Matrix, under the protective wings of the system. This is to some extent how »normal« fantasy functions – with, admittedly, a slightly perverse-fetishist note to it.

Then, however, we have the modern reflexive subject, our protagonist in the film, Neo – also one of the rebels. In the course of the film he learns how to liberate himself and is welcomed by the rebel group. After his initiation, Neo possesses the same knowledge as Cypher. He knows that steaks and cars and houses and women, etc., do not exist. This has been shown to him in all clarity by Morpheus, the leader of the rebel group, when he is introduced to a so-called »loading program«: a completely empty white room where things, situations, other people, etc., can be loaded according to one's wishes. In some sense this white room – the empty page, the neutral background – is what gives Neo the power to become master of the Matrix. He knows that it does not exist, so now he can move freely in it, he can fight Agent Smith, he can fly, he can bend the world as he likes. We get a premonition of this strategy, this way of thinking, when Neo »wakes up« outside of the Matrix for the first time. The following conversation between some of the rebels takes place over breakfast:

— Tank: Here you go, buddy; »Breakfast of Champions«.

[To Neo]

Mouse: If you close your eyes, it almost feels like you're eating runny eggs.

Apoc: Yeah, or a bowl of snot.

Mouse: Do you know what it really reminds me of? Tasty Wheat. Did you ever eat Tasty Wheat?

Switch: No, but technically, neither did you.

Mouse: That's exactly my point. Exactly. Because you have to wonder: how do the machines know what Tasty Wheat tasted like? Maybe they got it wrong. Maybe what I think Tasty Wheat tasted like actually tasted like oatmeal, or tuna fish. That makes you wonder about a lot of things. You take chicken, for example: maybe they couldn't figure out what to make chicken taste like, which is why chicken tastes like everything.

Apoc: Shut up, Mouse.

Do things really taste *like they should*? This is of course a question that can only be asked in a situation where you basically eat through an Other, sanctioning your meal. However, outside of the Other's hold (when the Other disintegrates), the coordination of tastes to substances breaks down. Is this not also what our molecular gastronomes aim for today? Nothing tastes like itself. In fact, the only thing we can rely on is »nothing«. On the one hand, we have the »bowl of snot«, the strange, neutral substance of a nothing with a minimal structure. And, on the other hand, we have everything that we can do with this nothing, what we can »load« into it: new tastes, flavors, etc.

The third eating situation in *The Matrix*, however, is the decisive one. Even though humans in the Matrix believe themselves to be free and happy, they are in fact pacified in the most humiliating way. They are detained in small cradles. The central image in the film shows millions of millions of cradles side by side in endless fields. In these cradles, filled with a slimy fluid, humans are fed through tubes and the surplus energy they produce from this »food« is then harvested by the machines. It is not that the machines simply feed on the »biogenic« energy produced by the humans; as Žižek points out, what is going on here is that the machines harvest the *jouissance* of the humans: »here we are back to the fundamental Lacanian thesis that the big Other itself, far from being an anonymous machine, needs a constant influx of *jouissance*«. ¹⁴ This is thus what we have to confront: that we ourselves uphold the (disintegrated, »reflexive«) big Other through the production (secretion) of *jouissance*. Cypher evidently does not confront this *jouissance* at the bottom of the Matrix (he wants to be reinserted). Neither does Neo. Neo reinserts himself so to speak. What he will do is develop his skills to become some sort of »super user« of the Matrix, bending its rules. Here is how Žižek assesses the way in which *The Matrix* succeeds in thinking emancipation in general:

— This is the correct insight of *The Matrix* [...] on the one hand, the reduction of reality to a virtual domain regulated by arbitrary rules that can be suspended; on the other, the concealed truth of this freedom, the reduction of the subject to an utterly instrumentalized passivity. And the ultimate proof of the decline in quality of subsequent installments of the *Matrix* trilogy is that this central aspect is left totally unexploited: a true revolution would have been a change in the way humans and the Matrix itself relate to *jouissance* and its appropriation. What about, for example, individuals sabotaging the Matrix by refusing to secrete *jouissance*? ¹⁵

Mutatis mutandis, we can transform this into a critique of the ideology of consumption. What about simply confronting the *jouissance* – in the form of the *objet a* of consumerism – which, even though capitalism has set us free from all bonds, still haunts us? ————— ■

■ ——— E N D N O T E S ——— ■

- 1 Roberta Sassatelli: *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics* (London, 2007), 107.
- 2 Slavoj Žižek: *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, 2006), 317–318.
- 3 Slavoj Žižek: *The Ticklish Subject* (London & New York, 2000), 352.
- 4 Žižek: *The Ticklish Subject*, 314.
- 5 I do not purport to make any thorough critique of capitalism in the following. What I do is point to the libidinal attachment to capitalism: that is, the »compulsion« that Žižek mentions here.
- 6 In the following I will not engage directly in the theory of the risk society, but only use (and criticize) it in its very minimal form. Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992) forms the background for my use.
- 7 Žižek: *The Ticklish Subject*, 354.
- 8 Jacques Lacan: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI* (New York & London, 1998 [1964]), 166.
- 9 This is where a theoretical distinction must be made between the principle of the superego, which means »stuckness«, and the emancipating principle of the death drive. I will not go into this discussion here. I have begun a discussion of this schism between the superego and the death drive in my PhD-dissertation, *The Pleasure of the Mouth* (unpublished). One could also look to Eric Santner's book *On The Psychotheology of Everyday Life* (2001).
- 10 See Lacan: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 185.
- 11 Slavoj Žižek: *The Plague of Fantasies* (London & New York, 1997), 1.
- 12 Renata Salecl: *The Tyranny of Choice* (London, 2011), 14–15.
- 13 See Žižek: *The Plague of Fantasies*, 7.
- 14 Žižek: *The Parallax View*, 313.
- 15 Ibid.

