

Object and Orgasm: A Manifesto of the Melancholy

We do not know what we want. We want freedom, but become enchanted by the neoliberal phantasm of choice. We want democracy, but accept techno-anocracy. We want nonviolence, but serve a social system in which violence is imbued in every participatory gesture. We want radical revolution, but become reactionary authoritarians to sustain the ghost of its aftermath. We want to abandon our proletarian destitution and make a good living among the bourgeoisie by operating the means of production, but we find that in fact it operates us. We want to have our cake and eat it, but it has too many calories and uses sugar sourced from child labor. We want everything, but get nothing. We want nothing, but get everything. Indeed, Desire is the trickster bastard of the liberal Happiness: constituted in the subject by her distance from the object, and vanishing when it comes within her grasp. Happiness remains infinitely deferred in a universe of redoubled mirrors. Our world is one of profound melancholy: we mourn the death of Desire but find it slyly resurrected in our distance from the next object – we are forever playing the Romeo to a sadistic Juliet. And here is precisely what we want when we want: the pleasure of the brooding melancholy, of mourning. There is no beauty in Romeo and Juliet unless they die, no humor in comedy unless it vanishes, no pleasure in objects unless they will be lost: if they are not lost, they become monotonous, obscene, dulled blasphemy. But at the same time we are all the more convinced that we know what we want. It is the core articulation of the totalitarianism, in all its forms, even the democratic ones: I certainly know what I want, and I too know better than you what you want for yourself.

How can we claim to know our way in a world in which Desire is always ahead of us?

Here is a manifesto of the melancholy, a politics of the orgasm.

Very little of the orgasm is orgasmic: the orgasm is the process of waiting, of pressure-construction by viscerally abstract partial drives, waiting, thinking, waiting, imagining, waiting, fantasizing – then, the explosive movement, the ejaculatory jouissance – but it is precisely at this moment in which Desire perishes, and amidst its deepening void we desire Desire yet again, and begin waiting, brooding, waiting, saturated in melancholy... The orgasm is never singular: it is multiple and partial, and therefore total. Orgasm may be postponed until death; it may be entangled in the ejaculatory pinnacle of a dozen others; it may be carried out shamefully in the conservative attendance only of God Himself. The orgasm is not productive: it is sensuous, masturbatory – even when it is polysexual. The titular point here is not the moment of ejaculation – which can be easily appropriated as a productive mechanism – but rather the melancholy of the orgasm as redoubled circular movement, of indulging positively in the negative space of what has been lost.

A politics of the orgasm begins not with revolt, but by a consciously apathetic embrace of our self-commodification. To resist it from a Luddite or pseudo-Marxist nostalgia for the old modes of production is to naively latch onto a vision of the orgasm as the linear culmination of romantic energy: a positively religious prudishness. But to embrace it from a hyper-capitalist atheist libertarian-liberal enthusiasm for more productive biopolitical arrangements is to even more naively appropriate the web of sexually liberated orgasms as a burgeoning, bleating heart of productivity: to fetishize the movement of the orgasm as monotonic and linear.

Capital, the (post-)Marxists say, ever so creative in its self-reproduction, makes us entrepreneurs of the self – commodifying our labor-power in the conspiring realms of the material, the intellectual, the reproductive, the romantic, the sexual, the racial... perhaps it is true. But is Marx's formulation not also true – that the commodity is made to “embrace the whole world of commodities... the universal equivalent”? The movement of the commodity is one of melancholy, of infinite circulation and searching, of an eternally deferred meaning: but melancholy is also about a twisted clarity, a deeper consciousness –

because it is precisely in melancholy in which we have grasped the deep absurdity of our world and the even deeper universality beneath. To self-commodify is to self-alienate, but it is a more complex than detachment: self-alienation is the moment from which we abstract ourselves from the partiality of the individual body to the universality of infinite circulation. It is the moment at which we access melancholy: we have lost our body, but it is exactly this loss which is the truth. The circularity of self-commodification cannot be linearized.

Perhaps this is the bluntest formulation (although circularity does not lend itself towards bluntness of any kind, and that is precisely the point – except there is no such precise teleological singularity): we should live lives of conscious melancholy such that we can live more true and conscious lives, and we are in many ways already living lives of *unconscious* melancholy – we must not resist melancholy, we must lean into it – and while this may be only a formal gesture, it is the formal system which gives us the greater consciousness. Extreme pleasure and prolonged pensiveness are reciprocally constitutive. It is not that we must live enlightened but miserable lives under Communism or hyperexcited saturated Hedonist but ultimately stupid lives under capitalism. Melancholy is a conscious drunkenness – we lean into our duller moments of reflective sadness such that our ejaculation may be more orgasmic, and we lean more into the orgasmic spasms of our ejaculation such that the ensuing melancholy may be more profound.

What does this look like? We should encourage, even require, students in the productive sciences to study the Humanities, not in the name of serving a historical or moral teleology of building more ethical or effective paths of production, but in the circular redundancy of melancholy: to existentially question production and education itself. We should not scorn upon dating apps either as corruptors of true love (as the conservatives bleat) or as vicious perpetuators of self-commodification (as the neo-Marxists bleat), but see them as ways of experiencing the world of images, to be drawn close and let loose, to suspend in melancholy: love gets boring, and what is truly beautiful are the quiet moments of suspended tears, the corner of love on the horizon, dancing representations. And it is only in our moment of alienation where we rise as images from our fallen material bodies and see how the productive and the antagonistic sensual supplement each other in subversive manners; and it is precisely this seeing which is the most alienating and melancholic moment. We should struggle for the causes of the proletariat, but with the swaggering ironic gestures of the comic, because the greatest comedy of all is the formal joke that there is no real proletariat anymore: in any case, none that we can really see in their proletarian conditions. We should consume oceans of content: suck desperately from the full and sexualized breasts of Hollywood, and beg to be fucked relentlessly by colors and objects ravenous social media platforms until we reach the orgasmic element and then fall into tired alienation: but it is also this experience which gives us profound joy, which may be a quiet joy; joy in the beautiful moments of distance and feeling which can come out of our alienation; and we may be able to understand our alienation and our joy as something more complex than a systematism which produces either one or the other. And above all else, we should heckle those who claim to know where to go – politically, ideologically, intellectually – in our twisted fields of circularity, even ourselves: even a student of topology theory knows that real projective fields are non-orientable; the surface of our world has no direction – and we must not insist on making this absence some sort of quasi-postmodern productive positivity. It is as the Joker, itself a production of the cinematic, which expresses the arche-productive: “I thought my life was a tragedy; but now, I realize it’s a comedy.” – I thought my life was a series of failed productive campaigns in love, work, life; but now, I realize in my melancholy that failure is immanent to desire: how stupid and ridiculous it all is.

Melancholy is at once profoundly *utopian* – the dream of a society with the beauties and luxuries of capitalism in which the paradigm of production has been thoroughly disfigured and burned; profoundly *pessimist* – the experience of a good life is full of a numbed post-ejaculatory shame, regret, sadness, and it

is precisely this which constitutes the body of the orgasm, the idealized moment of blissful human experience; and profoundly *realist* – in that the most sober way to see and live in the world is through melancholy: the alternative is to be drunk on consumerism, drunk on proletarian identification, drunk on the oppressive oppression of the oppressive oppressor, drunk on the opium of the masses, drunk on the virtues of freedom and liberty, drunk on the drive to relinquish the chains of the oppressed. . .

Appendix – Excised, Bloody Surgery

How thoroughly disgusting and sensuous the concept of the melancholy is. A true postmodern formulation for an apathetic America, continuously in a state of indulgent self-fellatio. Where does melancholy leave the plight of the materially oppressed classes, in the Global North and the South, who have no claim to a state of melancholy at all? We must be clear here: the politics of the organism is not an unbridled libertarian Hedonism, nor a neoliberal capitalist project, nor another state philosopher's conservative theoretical formalism. But here we are cornered; as to the reproach that the orgasm is a bourgeois preoccupation: we must here adopt Žižek's strategy of "fully embracing what one is accused of" – certainly, the politics of the orgasm is indeed a politics for the bourgeois. Yet in late capitalism the category of the bourgeois is not so clear as its Marxian formulation: when we are all made to be "entrepreneurs of the self", we all own the means to our production because we must: and such production is incessant in our era of information. We all consume and produce our fetishism of the commodity: it is exactly through our refusal to understand our fetishism that it becomes alive, just as God Himself: dead, but He does not know it, and this is precisely why He is well and alive.