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Panel Discussion

The Dream of Putrefaction

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I haven't so much as organized a formal paper today but instead thought I'd offer up some questions to the exhibition, but also try and sketch out some questions that the exhibition itself provokes.

To do this I'll refer to some of the tendencies of the works in the show and I'll also talk to the press release over two points that are not disconnected.

The Dream of Putrefaction as a phrase has the staple but also the promising ambiguity of exhibition titles. The phrase is enough to start to pull apart some of the details of its content, so what is the Dream of Putrefaction? And what is its claim to the works in the show? We can also ask, how and in what way this phrase applies to us, what it possibly states about us, through examining how the show as a whole produces a dialogue on this subject.

The title, suggest two immediate readings: that putrefaction is an ideal we long for but also on the other hand that it describes the virtual space of a dream like condition. This condition is what I am assuming the exhibition tells us that we are in, or at least it points to the notion that these works have a desiring relationship to it.

Both ways of understanding this phrase challenge our orthodox conceptions of political affect because in both readings we see the suspension of direct action: In the former because Putrefaction is perversely, perhaps, our future object of desire and in the latter because putrefaction is a dream-state of the unreal; the state of a horror movie style postmortem on the good liberal hopes of modernity. Modernity is now the decaying festering corpse that becomes the site of pleasure and violence. In this condition individual subjectivities are now immersed in a dream-like condition; apparently distanced from what we understand to constitute 'reality'. Here, identities are now structured, not on desiring a concrete empirical reality, or strong ideological parameters such as social freedom and solidarity, but instead connect to its opposite, the state of putrefaction; the disintegration of norms and conventions and the place where we embrace our own corruption.

So, whether we understand this phrase to mean our dream of putrefaction or that putrefaction is a dreamlike condition, in both we see the figured subjectivised body disintegrated into the miasma of experience; that of desire for the virtual on the one hand and that of a being virtual on the other hand. Here the state of putrefaction corrupts all readings of wholeness, of stable identities, and of sense. Putrefaction zeroes in on the integrity of the subject itself; our most privileged and established norm, the 'I' is now unstable, indeterminate and no longer capable of offering the security it once did.

This leads to my question, where I'd like to address the figuration that seems to be going on in a lot of the work. If we either long for or are in the state of the virtual what is the persistence of producing discreet figures within this work as subjects, as humans, where we get to ask not 'what' or 'how' but 'who'? . Is identity or identity politics being reinstated or reconstituted here? Is this dream of putrefaction actually a dream of producing the self. I ask this because putrefaction places the subject at the centre of its fantasy. This is a Sadean style theatre where the subject is victim and yet still in control of the fantasy.

To look at this another way; the immersion within the field of putrefaction is where we can make connections between putrefaction and postmodernity. A field of operations without ground, where the real and the representational and the objective and the subjective are indistinct. If this is so, our understanding of putrefaction takes us to the condition of antihumanism; a place to comprehend ones desubjectivisation - being towards the field of language. It is here where I can re-invite the same question: what is this persistence with the figural, with the human?

Secondly:

The press release asks "what results from this hybridized and denatured form of representation?"

Well, the condition of this hybridization is based on the entangling of reason and desire. These are 2 things that the show pivots around and seems to both enjoy and also find problematic. Our inability to distinguish between these elements; reason and desire has often been attributed as the crisis of postmodernism. Still now, critiques inherited from Enlightenment liberalist theory and Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reiterate this allegory of knowledge and power. They warn us that we must be vigilant over our belief in reason and our desire for rationalizing. According to this it is our *belief in* knowledge as a form of power that must be kept in check because without governance this

belief produces a disconnected, epic and spectacular monster: It is the path to terror and the holocaust. Humanity's unchecked belief in knowledge will inevitably end in self-destruction, either literally or ideologically.

This understanding of knowledge and its consequences sets its stow in a Hegelian politics of recognition where what is understood as the specifics of war or terror in one sense is now easily continued through to contemporary society at large, where the force of media culture is understood to exact a tyranny over our free identities. According to this Marxian inspired theory, in writing such as Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, or as recounted in Vaneigem's observation that "It is useless," "to expect even a caricature of creativity from a conveyor belt," the operations of media-culture in postmodernity inhabit a new sovereign justice. Here media culture or what is also often termed 'the culture industry' upholds deceptive laws through the prowess and spectacle of its own technologies. What is claimed here is that it is this very condition of technology; its power, that prevents us from separating out what we think we know from what we know. To achieve and maintain the power of law, technology works to erase the distinction between the real and the representational; *to produce false truths*.

In light of this problematic - on the alienating power of the technologies of media culture as a force in our lives - it is significant to remind ourselves that most of the artworks in the exhibition make no attempt to rationalise their desire or beliefs, a lot of them make no reference to the distinctions between the real and the representational and for the most part, technology and subjectivity are not held as polemics.

The press release for the show instead details a condition or attitude for the production and experience of the work; that of blankness, this dispassionate eye is the technological eye, the subject is both assimilated by and assimilates technological processes. In this assimilation the subject is not the victim of technology and as we have it here, its alienating potential. Instead in a great deal of the work we see the merging of the biological and the technological - the condition of total mobility in the space of a cultic fiction.

This remarkably appears to sound like the antimodern proto fascist literature of Ernst Jünger. Ernst Jünger's writing of the early 20th century often stemmed from and also covered his experiences as a soldier in the Great War. Jünger's literature was eager to assimilate

technology to the level of subjectivity in a prose that entangled adventure and functionality inherited from Nietzschean philosophy and Baudelairean literature.

In his 1927 essay “Fortschritt, Freiheit und Notwendigkeit,” Jünger writes: “In our technical era the individual appears to be evermore dependent, “unfree” and endangered.”¹ He continues “but the nature of these bonds are less visible than those of the feudal era. Hence they are even more absolute than the absolute monarchies.”² This already sounds like the anxieties of our Marxian theorists. However Jünger’s solution to the power of technology as violence is quite different: Rather than be vigilant about the dominance of technology over nature, Jünger saw in technology the locus of the authentic experience.

In immersing him/herself in the force of the technological image the subject experiences the thrill and adventure of rigorous mental control over the image and its power; the subject sets up a willing sacrifice to the technological so as to take on the anonymous power of the machine; this is the getting of power. In this way, Jünger foregrounds this rationalising process as an aesthetic experience. This experience is pleasure and force that situates itself within and traverses the fantasy and spectacle of power, but to do so dislocates itself from the space of the political.

I wanted to introduce Jünger’s ideas here because returning to the press release, it tells us that this attitude of the subject is indifference. Is this an indifference that puts on, as an actor or indeed Jünger may do, the indifferent faceless form of the technological as a kind of antimodern epic thrill of technologies demonic power over us?

If it is then what we are terming as indifference is in fact constituent of an active and passive relationship to media culture – a type of romantic nihilism or dialectical synthesis not dissimilar to Jünger’s fascinations with the technological image, its process and our relationship to it. This would be the continuing conflict within the symbolic order, between established hierarchies of the real and the representational, or everyday reality and an absolute powerful other.

On the other hand is this indifference an indifference to the very issue of media culture as it is described in modernity? Is it the falling away of media culture as this absolutist dominating force in our lives? The falling away of the real?

¹ Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 87 “Fortschritt, Freiheit und Notwendigkeit,” *Arminius* 8 1926, 8-10

² *Ibid.*, 88

So, at the moment I'm wondering exactly how technology is being positioned in what I term an antimodern sense or if it holds out a different articulation of the relationship between knowledge and power. But this is where I'll lay my cards on the table and make some connections of my own.

What strikes me with some of the work in the show is that the technology of media culture is not something that we struggle to form a relationship to. It is not something that we must give up to or be taken over by. For the most part works do not share this modernist fear and love of rationalism. Instead belief and reason are so entangled that the question of their separateness is undone. As I have asked in my initial question regarding the status of subjectivity, now I can turn my question to ask about the law. The law I'm talking about is our comprehension of reality as a stable entity.

If this latter point is more accurate and the indifference I have been talking about is a lack of concern, or even the state of the evacuation of an absolute dominating power be it good or evil, then the dream of putrefaction is our condition. If read in this way then the dream of putrefaction is then our passion for a real objective law manifest as theatrical spectacle that takes its place and is lived out within the political. Taking this further, we could then say that the term 'Dream' then, can now be encountered as the term 'fiction'. And I can make this modification because rather than peeling back the layers to disclose the real through Jüngerian style violent meditations, where technology is both redemption and death, here the fiction of putrefaction is something we produce live with and negotiate at the level of social reality.

Within this condition, the field of the political is infinite, and without edges. There is no outside to call upon or reach out to whether this is religion or as we have seen here today, technology. This means also, that there is no originary power or essential knowledge. The symbolic cultural forms that would seem to make it possible to make the distinction between the absolute power and the victims of it now take on the localized notion of the political. Significantly, this symbolic order is something that we have to take seriously; where we cannot dismiss this realm of production as artificial illusion precisely because it stakes its claim within our lives.

What I think is useful about this conundrum is that it means that the status quo of putrefaction is by no means depoliticized because *we are* media culture. Now the space of

putrefaction is not unreal. This is in fact the space of democracy; the description of the violence and pleasure of constructing both subjectivity and law.