

1/0: Structuring Freedom Through the Digital Binary

Matthew Flisfeder

Part 1: 1/0

On the digital binary

What follows extends a particular line of thinking from an argument I develop in my book, *Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*.¹ In that book, I aim to develop a “new structuralist” theory of social media, drawing largely on Lacanian-Žižekian insights into the subject’s position as expressing a lack or a gap in existing social, political, cultural struggles. In *Algorithmic Desire*, I argue that social media helps us to grasp the resuscitation of the big Other’s virtual agency in conditions of postmodern capitalism and the supposed end of ideology, end of history, or as Žižek calls it, the “demise of symbolic efficiency,” an offshoot of Fredric Jameson’s thesis that the postmodern can be grasped in Lacanian terms as a “breakdown of the signifying chain.”² Near the end of the book, I draw on the Lacanian logics of sexuation (Lacan’s formulas of masculine and feminine sexuation) to rethink and interpret the binary logic of digital coding, and vice versa. There, I also draw on Joan Copjec and Alenka Zupančič as they have rethought the logics of sexuation through the prism of German Idealism – most notably with Copjec (and Žižek) via the Kantian antinomies of pure reason.³ In this chapter, I aim to take up again this line of inquiry by proposing that binary code, as in the digital, provides us with a helpful shorthand for thinking about our current moment, particularly in the context of the current crises that we face – from the economic to the environmental and, of course, crises of identity. The way to read the digital, I claim, concerns the logic of

1 Matthew Flisfeder, *Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2021).

2 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (NY: Verso, 1999); Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 1146 (1984).

3 See Joan Copjec, “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason,” in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994); Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

the binary opposition and the way it provides a point of structural thinking tied not only to emancipatory politics and ethics but also to the libidinal attachments of the subject in its connection to enjoyment and freedom.

The binary, we might say, is a useful expression of crisis insofar as it represents a logic of conflict and struggle. Here, I am drawing from points made differently by media theorists such as Alexander Galloway and Roberto Simonowski. Digital logic, for them, is evidentiary of how we conceive of the semiotics of political struggle. This point indicates something close to the formal structures of emancipatory thinking. As Simonowski puts it, “the basic principle of the [online] filter bubble is antagonistic: someone or something belongs or doesn’t belong. The opposition connotes inside/outside or us/them thinking.”⁴ Antagonism, he writes, is thus reminiscent of binary code. Platform struggles thus extend beyond the surface level of the interface or the platform. The filtering systems on the front end of a platform follow the logic of the interface’s back end, designed by a binary polarisation of 1s and 0s. As a shorthand, binary code thus helps us to figure or represent the political’s binary logic in structuralist terms.

In his book on Laruelle, Galloway writes similarly that the digital provides insights into philosophy and critical theory, which, according to him, is “a digitization of the real because it is predicated on the one dividing in two.”⁵ The digital, he writes, “is the basic distinction that makes possible any distinction at all. The digital is the capacity to divide things and make distinctions between them. Thus not so much zero and one, but *one and two*” (emphasis original).⁶ Galloway, in his reading of the binary within the digital, sets out to examine it in a much more standard, positivist, or affirmationist way, whether in terms of the binary opposition as read, for instance, in deconstruction (i.e., the mark of the supplement; or the transcendental signified), or maybe even in the Maoist dialectic of the one dividing into two. However, I think it is far more productive to read the binary opposition as Simonowski does, where the one and the zero (1/0) represent the difference between the inside and the out, between the positive and the negative, or more appropriately between the affirmation and the negation.⁷ Or, perhaps more appropriately, we can read the 1/0 logic not

4 Roberto Simonowski, *Waste: A New Media Primer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018), 4.

5 Alexander Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 12.

6 Galloway, *Laruelle*, xxix.

7 It is worth noting, of course, that this is also the way that Mao reads the dialectic and, following Stalin, resolves to eliminate the Hegelian negation of the negation, preferring instead to think an infinite process of negation–affirmation–negation–affirmation. For me, though, an emancipatory dialectic is nothing if it does not include the subjective dimension of the negation of the negation, which, far from aiming at the synthesis of opposites, is in fact the position from which the subject grasps its own place within the process. See Mao Zedong, “Talk on the Question of Philosophy,” in *On Practice and Contradiction* (NY: Verso, 2007), 181.

only as the relation of the affirmation to its negation but as the self-relating negation of the 1 itself.

Lacanian discourse theory helps us out in reading the binary logic this way. For instance, in Lacan's discourse of the Master, the self-relating of the one is posited in terms of the opposition between the position of the battery of signifiers and the production of the Symbolic order (marked as the S_2 in the formula). The barred subject's (\$) position in the place of truth, below the Master-Signifier (S_1), represents the lack or gap, the signifier's self-relating that marks the contradiction within itself, rather than simply the opposition between itself and the Symbolic order:

$$\begin{array}{cc} S_1 & S_2 \\ \$ & a \end{array}$$

Read in this way, the binary opposition leads us to theorise, not the one and the two, but the *self-relating* of the one – of positing the one as the founding moment, however empty, of the structure. It posits a relating that takes precedence over the splitting into the two, which is the marker of its set: the chain of signification that flows from instituting a foundational signifier. In other words, the two's development is epiphenomenal, the result of the self-relating of the one to itself, and of a foundational forced choice of being over nothingness – of the affirmative instead of its self-negation.

While we encounter the binary between the affirmation and the negation, what really concerns us is the question of *what* is being affirmed or posited in this split. We can turn to a different register, beyond the digital, and back towards the ideological. Switching our point of reference towards the linguistic binary of the signifier, I think we can read the binary in a more traditional, structuralist way that grants us an avenue for thinking about the relationship between the binary and the libidinal economy. After all, positing the 1 ties it to producing the Lacanian object little *a*, the object-cause of desire, holding the one in its place as the structure's button tie (*point de capiton* or quilting point). Underlying the signifier's affirmation, in other words, is the fantasy framework of the negated choices not chosen in a foundational act of becoming, which binds us to the choice of the already-chosen signifier.

Structure/structurelessness

In rethinking the binary in this way, both politically and libidinally, I am drawing on the work of Anna Kornbluh. She proposes that formalisation or *structure* is a goal of both psychoanalysis and emancipatory politics.⁸ Structure is not merely the place to

8 Anna Kornbluh, "States of Psychoanalysis: Formalization and the Space of the Political," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 3 (2016). See also Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

begin our analysis; it is also the product of our critique. Put differently, every point of critique of the structure is also, and always, the production of a new one. Again, this only makes sense when we consider the structure of the analyst's discourse in Lacan, where the product is the creation or invention of a new Master-Signifier:

$$\begin{array}{cc} \underline{a} & \underline{\$} \\ S_2 & S_1 \end{array}$$

According to Kornbluh, emancipatory politics, therefore, can follow psychoanalysis by taking formalisation as its goal. This goal is in stark contrast to much of radical politics today, which sees smashing structures, and states of structurelessness, as its goal.

Referring to what she calls “anarcho-vitalism,” Kornbluh writes that formlessness and a destituent politics – “burn it all down” – has become

the ideal uniting a variety of theories, from the mosh of the multitude to the localization of microstruggle and microaggression, from the voluntarist assembly of actors and networks to the flow of affects untethered from constructs, from the defication of irony and incompleteness to the culminating conviction that life springs forth without form and thrives in form's absence.⁹

Contemporary critical theory, in other words, tends to privilege immediacy and transgression over production and dialectical reasoning, giving way to the *exploding* of binaries as its principle critical gesture. This is partly why the vague term “post-structuralism” makes sense: the Foucauldian turn to micropolitics, or the Deleuzo-Guattarian deterritorialisation, so admired by the accelerationists, also places the subject in the position of permanent critique, never aiming to build structures of emancipation.¹⁰

Against this orthodoxy, Kornbluh argues that a politics of universal emancipation needs to take “the instituting capacity of the material signifier” and the practice of institution – of *affirming*, but nevertheless *limiting*, a structure – as its central project.¹¹ As she puts it, “what psychoanalysis institutes is the thought and practice of a necessary but contingent *state*, that which stamps, that which is formed, that which facilitates existence.”¹² I would add here, as well, that which facilitates apprehending enjoyment. This point is also echoed in Todd McGowan's Hegelian theory of emancipation.

9 Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*, 2.

10 Cf. Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

11 Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*, 140.

12 Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*, 140.

Just as Kornbluh describes, it is typical to imagine emancipatory politics as one of absolute and determinate negation. In the neo-vitalist sense, this logic gains its impulse from the Spinozan conception of the absolutely infinite, *a perspective much more analogous to the analogue as opposed to the digital*. The digital, after all, emphasises the cut. Likewise, for Hegel, we grasp freedom as the subject's capacity to negate constraints or limits *externally* imposed. However, as McGowan notes, a perverse logic is in place if all one can ever do is transgress or negate external limits. Such an ethic ultimately helps to ensure the longevity of existing power, propping up authority as that against which we can only transgress and negate as the sign of our freedom. An ethics of transgression is constantly in need of – requires even – some authority that it must attempt to subvert. Thus, a true sign of our freedom is not merely our capacity to negate an externally imposed limit but our power to impose and affirm our own limitations. In fact, we can read the Lacanian traversal of the fantasy as grasping the fact that we are the ones who have chosen the obstacles to our desire in the first place. In a foundational act of forced free choice, the subject chooses or affirms the one, the signifier, negating all other choices not chosen.

This logic applies in the psychoanalytic conception of the cure, where we come to acknowledge that enjoyment lies not in the beyond of the limit but in the fantasy itself. In fantasy, we imagine that if only we could acquire the prohibited object then we would achieve full satisfaction; psychoanalysis teaches us, however, that enjoyment is actually contained in the fantasy. The political ethics of psychoanalysis is such that the subject itself has the freedom and capacity to impose *its own* limitations as a condition of non-repressive enjoyment.¹³ Following both Kornbluh and McGowan, my approach is to conceive the binary logic of the signifier similarly to Simonowski's schema of antagonism, as the 1/0, or in Lacanian terms, as the couple $S_1/\$$: the signifier, marking the affirmation, and the signifier of the barred subject, as the negation – the subject as marking the gap or lack in the structure.

My interest in thinking the binary in this way, thus, has to do in part with our current moment of relating to binary oppositions and structures of identity and culture, as in the sexual relationship (or, rather, as the non-relationship of the masculine and feminine sides of the logics of sexuation), but also in terms of the political antagonism of the class struggle.¹⁴ It is reasonable to consider the parallel between the digital *moment*, as Galloway does, and critical theories of the binary opposition as a way to remap the central contradiction of our times. My objective, then, is to think about the relationship between emancipatory politics and ethics, and in this sense,

13 I am drawing particularly on two of McGowan's texts here: *Emancipation After Hegel: Towards a Contradictory Revolution* (NY: Columbia UP, 2019) and *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (NY: Columbia UP, 2016).

14 For more on this point, interested readers should read chapter six of *Algorithmic Desire*, "The Swiping Logic of the Signifier."

the role of enjoyment, but along the lines of our thinking of the binary opposition and its connection to the structural production of our freedom.

To put it bluntly, I agree with Kornbluh that, in contrast to some of the language in post-structuralist and postmodernist theory, we need to defend a particular kind of structure or form – rather than its elimination – as a goal for emancipatory politics. However, I would add that doing so also means recognising how social constructions establish *historically defined* forms of power. Acknowledging this need not mean that emancipation equals the destruction of all structures. Certainly, emancipatory politics requires negating particularly limiting structures, like capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and eurocentrism. There certainly seems to be an anti-normative bent in so much of the performative rhetoric of the anarcho-vitalist Left.

But to put the point differently, we can acknowledge that norms are absolutely constructed *socially*, but they are also necessary and established *historically*; and often, still organically even when “structurelessness,” as Jo Freeman explains, is the apparent aim.¹⁵ Reading from the perspective of feminist efforts at structureless organisation, Freeman argues that the idealism of structurelessness often and evidently bites back with the materially inherent construction of *informal* and *deceptive* forms or structured elitism, which can often become far more violent than avowed structures and hierarchies. As Freeman puts it, “a ‘laissez faire’ group is about as realistic as ‘laissez faire’ society.” *Structurelessness* “becomes a way of masking power.”¹⁶

Bringing this point back to the framework of the digital binary, Reza Negarestani notes that even in mapping the logic of artificial general intelligence, we see that structure becomes inherent in every effort to grasp consciousness. There is, as he explains, “no structure in the world without the structuring mind, there is no mind and no *unrestricted* world without the structuration of language and its unrestricted universe in discourse.”¹⁷ To mark my commitments even more clearly: the binary opposition with which I am most concerned here is that between the 1 and the 0, between the positive and the negative, or between the affirmation and the negation – the affirmation of norms, or the negation of norms, for instance. Nevertheless, it is with regard to the structures of social and cultural norms that I see an activation of desire and investments in libidinal economies. Analytically, our aim, then, should be one of grasping the historicising logic of the signifier in various conditions of antagonism and struggle, which is, in the end, what an immanent critique allows us to do.

15 Jo Freeman, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” *Jacobin Magazine*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/09/tyranny-structurelessness-jo-freeman-consciousness-raising-women-liberation-feminism>.

16 Freeman, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness.”

17 Reza Negarestani, *Intelligence and Spirit* (Windsor Quarry: Urbanomic, 2018), 71.

Materiality of the binary: The signifier falls into the signified

The difficulty with binary thinking, insofar as we conceive it in terms of the 1 and the 0, rather than the 1 and the 2, centres on its limitations in historical thinking. If we consider, for instance, how Copjec distinguishes between essentialist or dogmatic views of sex (sex as a purely natural/biological dimension of identity, that is, biological determinism) and the social constructionist or sceptical view of it (for her, represented by Judith Butler's approach in *Gender Trouble*), then what we should add is a *historical* dimension.¹⁸ Hegel indicated this with his "negation of the negation" – we acknowledge the social constructionist perspective (the object, sex, as a discursive construct) and accept it. However, in the Hegelian procedure, we also recognise that, with every critique of a norm, we also equally produce and impose a new one – the one from which the critique finds its basis of comparison. In this way, we discover the inscription of a new *necessary*, albeit contingent, instituting signifier. Negation of the negation is not a mere synthetical combination; instead, it is a way of reading the immanent self-negation of the initial positing of the Master-Signifier or the 1. It is a way of reading the signifier against its own lack. Thus, the new master-signifier's production is the result of taking critique to the end. It is not arbitrary. It is, instead, produced by thinking contradiction to its endpoint, as in the Lacanian discourse of the analyst. However, by *sublating* the older framework, this new signifier institutes a new structure rather than destroying the structure as such. It is what gives structure its historical ebb.

We can read this, for instance, through Zupančič's description of the Lacanian logic of the signifier falling into the signified or of the Symbolic having an effect in the Real. She points out that every signifying structure is organised around a gap: "for the relational differentiality to exist and to function, the *one* (of the binary relation) has to be missing." This, she writes, makes all the difference since this is "Lacan's crucial addition which allows him to reintroduce the concept of the subject (of the unconscious) at the very highest point of the structuralist attacking of this notion." But then notes, "Lacan is quick to add that his point is 'to show how the signifier in fact enters the signified.'"¹⁹ The subject's presence (the shift from a foundational negation to the negation of the negation), in other words, marks the presence of a gap or a lack in the structure, therefore providing a space for the subject to act to transform the structures in place. When the signifier falls into the signified, the materiality of the structure, rather than its mere contingency (the perspective of the social constructionists), is fully produced.²⁰

18 See Copjec, "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason."

19 Zupančič, *What is Sex?*, 59. Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (NY: Norton, 2006), 417.

20 See Flisfeder, *Algorithmic Desire*, 173–175.

Whether because of our knowledge of the Real, produced via discourse, or our non- or unconscious knowledge of it, we are still capable of acting upon the world and changing it. However, knowledge (*connaissance*) as opposed to consciousness (*conscience*) in the analytical discourse is what makes us freer. Climate science is a parallel example. Coming to know nature through discourse makes it possible for us to act on it, for better or worse – but this still carries an effect.²¹ Here, what changes is the register of the object in our frameworks of knowledge, allowing us to reflect upon and ask what type of effect we can produce.

This impact on the Real always refers to a foundational choice – a decision between an affirmative and a negative; between the affirmation and the negation. I argue that such a choice is fundamentally attached to the conditions of our enjoyment or to our libidinal economy, which nevertheless is organised, formed or structured, with reference to a socially or culturally determined object or signifier. Moving towards my conclusion, I want to expand on how the binary I am addressing is represented in the registers of Deleuze (a supposedly affirmationist theorist) and Lacan (a theorist of negation or the negative, that is, lack).

Part 2: Deleuzian affirmationism versus Lacanian lack

Analogue ethics and affirmative monism

Considering the preceding, it is noteworthy that so much of the contemporary critical-ideological discourse finds its inspiration in the Deleuzo-Guattarian disdain for the imperialism of the despotic signifier. We see this, for instance, in varieties of new materialism, neo-vitalisms, posthumanisms, and accelerationisms. These tendencies appear to privilege the analogue over the digital (as Galloway might put it), proceeding from the substance's capacity for structureless self-organisation or development.²² From this perspective, introducing the signifier into the topology of the Real becomes that which erroneously produces a split or a cut, or what Aaron Schuster calls, referring to Deleuze, the *violence* of the negative.²³ In this sense, the split signifier *inscribes* negativity and contradiction by cutting into what is otherwise whole or substantial. Introducing the negative appears to be what produces

-
- 21 I take up this point in "From the Sublime to the Hysterical Sublime: Reading the End of the World Against the Singularity," in *Lacan and the Environment*, ed. Clint Burnham and Paul Kingsbury (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).
 - 22 Anton Syutkin explores this point, looking at the Deleuzian influence on contemporary vitalist new materialisms. See Syutkin, "Gilles Deleuze Among the New Materialists: Dialectic versus Neovitalism," *Stasis* 7, no. 1 (2019): 408.
 - 23 Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 45.

and creates a tyrannical or hierarchical structure, which at the same time denies an affirmative desire.

There is, thus, a sense in which new materialists of this sort aim for a return to a kind of immanence that breaks the shackles of an imposing signifier or obstacle. Although Deleuze does not appear to go directly for a Spinozan monism of the kind often ascribed to him, his project still seems to point at times towards what Syutkin calls an “affirmative monism,” which “always presupposes the possibility of a return to vitalism.”²⁴ But I believe we can still detect this in the way that Deleuze privileges the *affirmation* of difference and the multiple in various places, but also specifically in his book on Nietzsche. In that book, Deleuze even describes the force of the negative as affirming the will’s opposing aggression.²⁵ The claim regarding Deleuze’s affirmative monism makes sense to me when we reflect upon the relationship between the subject and the obstacle in Deleuzian theory. Indeed, the obstacle’s position can help us distinguish between the Deleuzian project of emancipation and Lacan’s project.

Reading the binary through Lacan, we see that the posited two – as in the two sexes in the heterosexual relationship, for instance – are never two, but rather more foundationally, the one and its lack: the signifier and the lack (1/0). I prefer to think of this division as the affirmation of the phallic signifier of *castration* and its negation, so that both positions still relate to the same signifier; however, *one* form of this relating remains limited (the masculine), whereas the other does not (the feminine). One relates to the signifier as the paradoxical affirmation of a castration, whereas the other relates to it in the form of its negation. Nevertheless, we still need to ask, *what* is this void, this lack?

The choice of the cut

We should read this lack as a foundational split within the subject itself, between the subject’s self-positing affirmation, as well as its self-reflecting negation, or as immanent and dialectical negation of the negation. We should read this split from the position of what Žižek sometimes refers to as the foundational forced choice of being, since even here, with every choice that follows, the choice is simultaneously the product of a split between the affirmation and the negation. Every choice, at the same time, negates the unchosen. We might imagine it, sticking with the representational form of the digital, as something like the swiping logic of social media apps, such as Tinder or TikTok. Swipe left; swipe right. Swipe up; swipe down – affirmation; negation. With every choice made, we negate another (and fantasy, we might add, is the imaginary of the choices not chosen).

24 Syutkin, “Gilles Deleuze,” 409.

25 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (NY: Columbia UP, 2006), 9.

Whatever we affirm *simultaneously* negates some other content. I believe this is how we should understand symbolic castration in the Lacanian sense. The affirmation, the self-positing, of the signifier also negates that unmade (little) other choice. The unchosen other/object is thus the inverse side of the object chosen. The signifier chosen is the one for which, now, all others come to determine the subject, but still, on the inverse side of this choice exists the *lost* object. This lost choice is translated into the object-cause of the subject's desire – it is lack, objectivised. What gets produced in the subject, through the fantasy of attaining or acquiring this lost object, is the curvature of its desire: its libidinal economy. Hence, the binary opposition is productive of both the subject of the unconscious and its libidinal economy.

Todd McGowan is quite clever in relating the subject's desire to the logic of capital, or, more specifically, to the logic of commodity fetishism. In his book on capitalism and desire, he boldly claims that capital plays on the subject's desire because it systematically knows that what the subject desires – the way it invests into its libidinal economy – is not the object but the obstacle preventing its realisation. I should add that this was also one of the insights in Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* and Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. On this point, I disagree with the reading of capitalism as schizophrenic – its formal discursive and libidinal shape is much closer to that of perversion. As Samo Tomšič puts it, capitalism is not itself perverse, but it “*demand*s perversion from its subjects... [It] demands that subjects *enjoy* exploitation.”²⁶ That is to say, it “*imposes* the perverse position on the subject,” but how?²⁷

It is important to specify here the relationship between knowledge and its disavowal on the part of the perverse subject, who may appear to avow the non-existence of the object but pursues it nonetheless (because that knowledge is disavowed). As McGowan puts it elsewhere, the subject can acknowledge “the hopelessness of consumption while simultaneously consuming with as much hope as the most naïve consumer.”²⁸ But we might also read the subject's relationship to its desire under capital in the form of the obsessional neurotic, who constantly erects their obstacles to realising desire since enjoyment is procured through the chase. In either case, though, it is positing the *obstacle* that creates the conditions of possibility for enjoyment. But this, nevertheless, is a *self-positing* of the obstacle, and not merely its imposition from outside. There is then a paradoxical relation to the obstacle and to the structure for which it stands: there is a desire to negate the obstacle and its structure, since it appears to prevent access to our enjoyment; however, there is also a desire to affirm the obstacle and its structure since only within these coordinates

26 Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (NY: Verso, 2015), 151.

27 Tomšič, 150.

28 Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 29.

can the subject enjoy its failure to attain its object. Therein lies a critical difference between the libidinal economy in the Lacanian register and its interpretation in the Deleuzian one.

From the Deleuzian perspective, the obstacle can be read as an *external* force negating the positive, affirmative flows of desire. This is why it is crucial (contrary, perhaps, to what I said above) not to read Deleuze as a monist but as a dualist of a specific type – namely, one who still emphasises dialectic and antagonism, and conflict. In this way, the Deleuzian logic is the mirror reflection of capitalist desire, which also engages in an endless conversion from deterritorialisation to reterritorialisation; why not, even the Maoist dialectic of affirmation-negation-affirmation. If we can understand desire in the Lacanian register as a lack, as the negative, then in the Deleuzian one, it becomes an affirmative force, or, in the Spinozan sense, of determination by way of its negation. Everything depends on where we locate the site of the obstacle – is the obstacle imposed externally, by some oppositional or exploitative force, or is it self-imposed (self-positing) by the subject?

Whereas the Deleuzian ethic is one of deterritorialisation, we can locate the Lacanian ethic in the idea that the ends of analysis arrive once the subject avows the positing of its own presuppositions. The subject realises that it has posited the obstacle, on its own, as the only means for accessing enjoyment, and coming to terms with this fact requires not merely the negation of the obstacle but the negation of the negation. At the end of analysis, the analysand concludes that the source of enjoyment is the fantasy, not what appears to lie beyond it. The subject brings to consciousness the inevitability of the contradiction between the signifier and the lack, and its inability to transcend its positing as such. This awareness, however, brings the subject face to face with its own freedom: it has the freedom to posit its own presuppositions or impose its own obstacles or limits/limitations – the subject gives to itself the structure of its own freedom. But, still, how do we arrive at this position as an act of emancipation?

The binary logic of the true infinite

How might we read, in other words, Lacan's motto, do not give up on (or give ground towards) your desire? The first thing to do here is to *begin* with negation rather than affirmation. The subject is split by the desire to *transcend* the contradiction between the signifier at its lack, and the desire to nevertheless *pursue* this contradiction. We should, in other words, proceed with the negation as the starting point of choice, where freedom is the continuous act of saying "that's not it, I am not that" – or, even, the hysterical question, "why am I that? Why am I what you are saying that I am?"

Even in the political register, it is *necessary* to negate real material forces that do oppose from outside the subject's freedom. For instance, the structural contradictions of capital create genuine material barriers for subjects needing to access ev-

eryday resources. Certainly, we need to oppose such external forces. That is obvious. And freedom, here, surely is the result of a certain practice of negation. History, after all, is made by the masses but in conditions not of their choosing. Differently put, the base may determine the superstructure, but the revolutionary class can negate the base.

Here, freedom is produced as a negation of all the subject's determinations – biological, cultural, or political. Desire, here, should be read as the object-cause that initiates freedom through negation, which still aims towards a particular object. Here, we can see the splitting of the drive between its goal, which is its target, and its aim, which is to circulate around its goal. But at a certain point, as McGowan notes, negation can only prop up what it opposes, as what it negates. At a certain point, it must set its own limits, its determinations, and affirm whatever necessary, however contingent, structure is required to realise its freedom. Again, this is the perspective we arrive at through the negation of the negation, which does not merely affirm the new but grasps the position from which the new can be affirmed.

The Deleuzo-Guattarian ethic, in contrast, is one of seeking to affirm desire rather than structure, which gets inhibited by some *external* negating and contradictory force. Deleuze, in particular, draws on Nietzsche to assert this position against the Hegelian dialectical one:

In Nietzsche the essential relation of one force to another is never conceived of as a negative element in the essence. In its relation with the other the force which makes itself obeyed does not deny the other of that which it is not, it affirms its own difference and enjoys this difference. The negative is not present in the essence as that form which draws its activity: on the contrary, it is a result of activity, of the existence of an active force and the affirmation of its difference. The negative is a product of existence itself: the aggression necessarily linked to an active existence, the aggression of an affirmation. As for the negative concept (that is to say, negation as a concept) "it is only a subsequently-invented pale contrasting image in relation to its positive basic concept – filled with life and passion through and through." For the speculative element of negation, opposition or contradiction Nietzsche substitutes the practical element of *difference*, the object of affirmation and enjoyment... The question which Nietzsche constantly repeats, "what does a will want, what does this one or that one want?", must not be understood as the search of a goal, a motive or an object for this will. What a will wants is to affirm its difference. It is essential relation with the "other" a will makes its difference an object of affirmation.²⁹

The difference between freedom in the Deleuzian register and its place in the Lacanian one concerns the position of the obstacle. For Deleuze, desire is an affirmative

29 Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, 9.

force that gets thwarted by an *imposing* external obstacle – contradiction and negation are imposed upon the subject, imposed upon the subject's positive substantial desire. For Lacan, desire is lack (the desire to avoid contradiction and the drive to pursue contradiction) – lack in objective form – and the obstacle is self-imposed as a limit: a limit that the subject self-positing rather than being imposed by the Other. We find here the difference between an absolute infinity of the kind we also find in Spinoza, and the Hegelian true infinity, which is premised, not on extension forever, as in a straight line that forever expands, or as an infinite self-division into an ongoing multiple, but rather as the circular form of going through the process in order to arrive back at the beginning again, from the starting point, only with a new and different perspective on the problem we were pursuing in the first place. “As true infinite, bent back upon itself,” Hegel writes, “its image becomes that of a *circle*, the line that has reached itself, closed and wholly present.”³⁰

So to return to the problem of the binary opposition I started with, we see, first of all, we are speaking about the opposition between affirmation and negation; that the contradiction between them is vital to the interpellation of the subject; and that the subject's interpellation is at the same time the emergence of its libidinal economy. Our question remains: must emancipation follow the path of destroying the limit/obstacle – aspiring towards structureless deterritorialisation – or of a legitimate, self-imposed structure needed both in realising enjoyment in fantasy and universal freedom?

Building on arguments made by Kornbluh and McGowan, I propose that producing a new master-signifier – producing a new historical norm – posits both the formal logic of emancipation and its enjoyment. This new arrives, in other words, not merely by some completely conscious choice of action, but by following our desire and thinking it all the way to its logical ends. This makes the dialectic of enjoyment, the dialectic of the binary, affirmation and negation, an emancipatory political factor worth considering. The binary logic of the digital merely maps for us in representational terms how we can think of this relation today. After all, the dominant media of every historical period give us points of entry for conceiving the dominant form of consciousness and the dominant ideology. It is, in this sense, appropriate for us to conceive the digital as a representational strategy for conceiving the libidinal and the political.

30 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 119.

References

- Copjec, Joan. "Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason." In *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, 201–236. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche & Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson. NY: Columbia UP, 2006.
- Flisfeder, Matthew. *Algorithmic Desire: Toward a New Structuralist Theory of Social Media*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2021.
- . "From the Sublime to the Hysterical Sublime: Reading the End of the World Against the Singularity." In *Lacan and the Environment*, edited by Clint Burnham and Paul Kingsbury, 239–253. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
- Freeman, Jo. "The Tyranny of Structurelessness." *Jacobin Magazine*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/09/tyranny-structurelessness-jo-free-man-consciousness-raising-women-liberation-feminism>.
- Galloway, Alexander. *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Science of Logic*. Translated by George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53–92.
- Kornbluh, Anna. "States of Psychoanalysis: Formalization and the Space of the Political." *Theory & Event* 19, no. 3 (2016). <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/623989>
- . *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Translated by Bruce Fink. NY: Norton, 2006.
- McGowan, Todd. *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- . *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets*. NY: Columbia UP, 2016.
- . *Emancipation After Hegel: Towards a Contradictory Revolution*. NY: Columbia UP, 2019.
- Negarestani, Reza. *Intelligence and Spirit*. Windsor Quarry: Urbanomic, 2018.
- Noys, Benjamin. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014.
- Schuster, Aaron. *The Trouble With Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016.
- Simanowski, Roberto. *Waste: A New Media Primer*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018.
- Syutkin, Anton. "Gilles Deleuze Among the New Materialists: Dialectic versus Neovitalism." *Stasis* 7, no. 1 (2019): 390–414. <https://doi.org/10.33280/2310-3817-2019-7-1-390-414>

- Tomšič, Samo. *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*. NY: Verso, 2015.
- Zedong, Mao. "Talk on the Question of Philosophy." In *On Practice and Contradiction*, 169–185. NY: Verso, 2007.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology*. NY: Verso, 1999.
- Zupančič, Alenka. *What is Sex?* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017.

