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# The Metaphysical Underpinnings Contemporary Attitudes in Consumerism: An Pontification?

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The Metaphysical Underpinnings Contemporary Attitudes in Consumerism:  
An Pontification?

Jason Stigliano  
2009 May

## I. Anarcho-Primitivism on Civilization

*“The more I eat, the more I know  
I am the hungry earth alone”*

-Elizabeth Millikin

### 1- Introduction to the A.-P. Theses

Contemporary philosopher and activist, John Zerzan, critiques modern civilization, and then in hindsight the history of civilization, on two central grounds, which form the basis for the rest of his criticism and theory. Firstly, we are alienated from existence in as much as our experience is, in various ways, mediated rather than immediate. Through language (or symbolic thought), a sense of measured time, symbolic ritual, technology and all the other constituents of civilized culture, we become alienated. His ideal existence might be something like the state of animals as described by John Gardner in his novel *Grendel*, “he stares at as much of the world as he can see and feels it surging in him, filling his chest as the melting snow fills dried out creek beds”<sup>1</sup>.

Secondly, we are oppressed materially, inequality being essential to civilization. This inequality began, roughly, with the advent of permanent agriculture, which gave rise also to specialization and division of labor; technology serves to facilitate this material inequality as much as it also becomes a part of alienating culture. As some men began to fall under the dominion of others, a swelling of culture occurred, as symptom of rising misery, both as a means of coping with the harshness of agricultural life as opposed to gatherer-hunter existence, and as means of controlling those whose lot was mostly worsened by the new late neolithic regime.

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<sup>1</sup> Gardner, *Grendel*, 7.

While, for his claims regarding alienation in civilization in general, Zerzan relies on analyses of contemporary suffering under the assumption that they are joined analytically to various similar modes of suffering throughout civilization (again, defined as agricultural and post-agricultural life), he relies as much on archeological and anthropological evidence as on contemporary life to show that we are, in some sense, materially less well off — and certainly less equal — than was man the gatherer-hunter. In addition to these two philosophical branches of his thought, Zerzan is also emphatic about the need to preserve our biosphere and control population; however, this is a less philosophically interesting and more straightforward (we might say, wishfully, straightforwardly obvious) element of his thought.

Although a philosopher, Zerzan might be better described as an activist using the language and techniques of philosophy in order to reveal the emptiness of its own bases; though he writes little of modern enlightenment philosophy, he undoubtedly would attack it vehemently for its elevation of thought over sensation and experience. In fact, the language he uses to describe our cultural alienation is similar to the Nietzsche's regarding our Platonic denial of the real world. Nevertheless, in as much as Zerzan is concerned with philosophy, he reserves his venom for our contemporary postmodernists. His criticism of them is not theoretical but pragmatic or ethical (depending on whether you take Zerzan's exhortations as good advice or moral imperative). For Zerzan, postmodernism is a theory which makes popular a "passive nihilism;" as postmodernism preaches infinite interpretation and the supposed aesthetically driven, personal cognitive creation of our world, it justifies not only late consumer capitalism, but every other evil that we could imagine. That is, because postmodernism tends to deny the possibility of universal claims and absolute truths (moral or otherwise), at least when these ideas enter the public mind, they give rise to the idea that every attempt at a social criticism will have

failed before it has begun, in that it must purport to universal understandings concerning humanity. In this sense, Zerzan considers the postmodernist one who, as a ship sinks, would sit on the deck with his eyes closed and fingers in his ears repeating, “I re-imagine the world; the ship is not sinking; the ship is *not sinking!*” While Zerzn’s criticism is ethical, and in fact rather unnuanced, I will attempt a criticism of postmodernism on its own terms and show that it is untenable in its extremes (although it impossible to do so completely when dealing with a philosophy whose central tenet is the failure of universal reason).

Sympathetic though I am to Zerzan’s attack on civilization as an historically enslaving institution and postmodern consumerism as a hollowed, immiserating way of un-life, I believe that he mistakes the nature of culture and “symbolism.” His critique of representational art, “Abstract Expressionism: Painting as Vision and Critique” reveals that he falls into the error of extremes as much as does the postmodernist in the application of his theory (incidentally, it also reveals a questionable knowledge of art history). His claim is that all “representational” art is inauthentic and unsatisfying, because it relies on symbol and only ever separates us from the real object for which it acts as a stand in. This claim is based on an implicit, reshuffled platonic hierarchy of reality. It is a similar sort of hierarchy that Arthur Danto rejects in order to justify abstract art; in fact, his defense of abstract art is similar to Zerzan’s praise for it, but whereas Zerzan makes a sharp divide between representational and abstract art, Danto shows that the two actually function in the same way.

If symbolic art is unproblematic, in fact is not symbolic in the way Zerzan thinks it is, then it is also true that symbolic culture, understood as the integration of abstract aesthetic activity into our everyday lives, is equally unproblematic and non-symbolic — at least it need not be problematic. What is at issue is not culture itself, but it’s swelling, its infectious growth with

the oppression of civilization. The impoverished, through centuries to the present, have nowhere to turn but to religious culture, some promised rapture of immortality or oblivion, and in this way are further controlled by those who force their servitude (a culture designed to control others is the only one handed out free by the ruling class). The workers of the late capitalist first world have the honor of buying their own culture, from purportedly infinite choice, without regard for the fact that misery is the logical end of consumerism in as much as we will cease to consume if ever we are struck by a feeling of contentment.

Out of desperation, the workers of the world consume whatever culture is offered to them. The postmodernists consume avant-garde art and think they are free because they are not tempted by the beautiful. We consume, we often see little choice but to consume, bad art and then complain about art in general, and the postmodernists say “there is no bad art.” This is what Nietzsche repudiates when he proclaims, “equality among equals; inequality among unequals.” In the ideal state (much as Zerzan likes to think of himself as an idealist) we are not equals in our bestial, immediate pouring-into of the world. We may be equals in our comfort, in that we are clothed and fed and free from disease; however, we must have the courage distinguish the beautiful from the ugly, even as we waver under skepticism, and this can never be done in a civilization which pits man against man in a desperate struggle for capital and sometimes survival.

## 2- Mediation <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As far as credit for this section goes, I am vastly indebted to Zerzan for at least the bases of these analyses. The arrangement, synthesis and expansion of these ideas herein, however, is largely my own. It is, therefore, mostly impossible for me to give adequate citations in this section except by directing the reader to the various works listed

Let us begin with the most obvious, or at least the most concrete, examples of the alienating mediation of our experience, those modes and methods of life which distance us from the self-generated import of our lives — the mediation of our experience by *technology*. Beginning with contemporary mass communication, consider the question — what has the technology promised us? Greater connectivity, a “world village,” and has it not been a great success? Have we all not wondered of late, what might be the source of our age’s unprecedented, joyful global comradery? Yes, it is well known how each of us feels deeply edified on having received customer service from another country — how much we have learned in this way about the cultures of others! How many dear friends has each of us made? Do not take my point to be xenophobic; it is not, but precisely the opposite. Through technology we have reduced the peoples of other countries from customary stereotypes to mere utilities-- they are the voices we hear over the phone. Are foreign laborers, their work shipped to us with greater speed than ever before, the delivery expedited and organized by millions of number-crunchers via the latest information technology, *are they more* to us than a cheap stitch on our pant-leg? I wonder for how many consumers it is so. At least when we see the impoverished in our own community, we are forced to admit that there is a lean and tired *human* whom we lack the wherewithal to care about.

When we watch films about another country do we not claim, often, that we understand it a little better, and if we *read* about some other place, oh *how much* we must know subsequently!

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under Zerzan’s name in my bibliography.

Indeed, we have learned facts, and we may impress others with our wrote knowledge of foreign cultures; we may even be able to limit our own cultural arrogance, or interact more successfully with persons from those places, but there is no parity between reading about St. Chapel and being there, nor reading about a people and meeting them.

Even among those of us who revere words, no language can equal<sup>3</sup> the ocean wave when it leans and falters in the wind; words in such cases are sufficient only to tantalize. Pictures? Videos? Where on *Youtube* will you find the brine of a winter gale? All this information and half-knowledge lead us on, leaving us to wish for experiences that many will never have the resources to pursue. And what do poets do but distill from various experiences the most magnificent aspects of existence in combinations we may never actually experience, until we are satisfied only by their false promises and, disappointed with the real, retreat from the world.<sup>4</sup> Have they made a cocaine of words?

Again, in regard to communication, how is it that we interact with others now? Many of our relationships to loved ones and coworkers are conducted primarily in email and over the phone. Zerzan points out the supreme irony of our having termed this activity “keeping in touch.”<sup>5</sup> It is the very denial of tactile reciprocity, a mediation and separation of ourselves from others. It is, of course, “better than nothing” to communicate by email during periods of absence, but why the tremendous prevalence of this necessary evil? As noted above, information tantalizes us away from our roots, so we flee one lack only to find another, one which we require *yet more*

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<sup>3</sup> *Strictly speaking*, my use of the word “equal” here is technical as in “function equivalently to,” but I aim not to speak too strictly.

<sup>4</sup> a suggestion advanced by Schopenhauer

<sup>5</sup> Zerzan, *Running on Emptiness*, 7.

information technology to compensate for. Not only that, it is an encouragement to initiate and tolerate physical distance from others, this belief that we still remain in touch.

We are also alienated by the technology of *mass production*. It alienates the laborer not only from his product conceptually — i.e. he has no personal interest in his product, equally a problem with the feudal serfs for instance — but also sensually. The creator has no experience of his creation, for he produces only the smallest part of it before the product moves onto the next step executed by a similarly disinterested worker. Furthermore, standardization emphasizes *form* over *particularity*. We often buy some manufactured product as a member of its class, not for itself; that is, mass production creates more rigid distinctions between products and all products distinguished in the same way are rendered as close to identical as possible, thus our options are curbed according to pre-decided, essentially arbitrary, categories and our sensual desire is prevented from expressing itself in its acquisition of aesthetic life. Generally, as long as technology acts as an intermediary between ourselves and our creations, our interaction with the objects of interest is rendered less salient.<sup>6</sup>

Above are the more concrete sorts of mediation which concern Zerzan and his colleagues. Turning now to the abstract, we may implicate time, specifically its structured regulation, in our alienation. Zerzan writes, “In the world of alienation no adults can contrive or decree the freedom from time that the child habitually enjoys — and must be made to lose. Time training — the essence of schooling — is vitally important to society.”<sup>7</sup> Part of what Zerzan is discussing here is the necessity of time for the maintenance of the (corrupt) social order; it would be impossible to organize and regulate people into various sorts of work gangs without an enforced sense of time,

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<sup>6</sup> Clearly, this paragraph is owed to Marx’s canon.

<sup>7</sup> Zerzan, *Running on Emptiness*, 32.

particularly because many forms of labor are so dull and infinitely repetitive that it is infeasible to measure the worker's progress in terms of the completion of projects.

This is not all, however, that Zerzan intends when he impugns the parsing up of time. It is also a prime example of, as he uses the term, *reification* — that is, the rendering of some experience, or set of experiences, into a *thing* or *object*, such that it becomes appreciated as a member of a universal separate from our immediate being. As such, Zerzan holds, reification results in a lessening of sensual appreciation of the world. In what ways, specifically, might we be more joyful without a sense of time? Are we not always fraught with worry over time, as when we say, “I am growing older,” “I should have made more of myself by now,” “I have pressing deadlines”? And there is more — a sense of the past, present and future as distinct entities — that is, a separation of the self from the flowing forth of the world — is the prerequisite for all anxiety. Indeed, it is the difference between being filled with the world and have it stretch out around you to the looming horizon. How could we fear if we did not imagine the future? How could we mourn and regret if we cared not for our memories of the past? But — we of the civilized world know the reality of time, and overwhelming importance of the past and the future. We say, that is why we are better than the animals, why we have achieved so much. Indeed, it is impressive how many humans can be murdered and dominated with proper planning. The most meticulous planning, consequently, is required to protect ourselves from the machinations of others.

Now, while we are thinking of reification and of man's achievements, we ought consider the most astounding of these, the reification of nothingness, the generation *ex nihilo* of the universal being — I am referring, of course, to *religion*, along with its “rational” counterpart metaphysics. There is so much difference between saying *God is everything* and *every thing is*

*God*. In the first, we reify the absolute lack of essential properties into the highest being; God (or pure substance, whichever you like) is the absolute denial of experience as real, or meaningful, for all “meaning” is placed in Absolute Nothingness. If we say the second, rather, we affirm the absolute<sup>8</sup> reality of every experience — but *how infrequently* this has been done. As Nietzsche observes, our whole notion of ethics is based on the affirmation of universality over particularity. Utilitarianism is based on the equality, the essential sameness, of every being; the utilitarian has no idea of beauty, nor ugliness and vileness, as evaluable separately from quantas of pleasure and pain — the actual qualities of a thing lose their specific sensual and aesthetic significance, as they are reduced to their measurement in the hedonistic calculus, which is an abstraction of all things into one of two kinds, simplifying and depleting our conceptual apparatus. Same, the Kantian or the Schopenhauerian; in fact, Schopenhauer insists on the ontologically numerical identity of every being as the metaphysical explanation of his ethics. How then could we deny that our values slander sensuality? Even in the media, it is more permissible for young people to watch images of murder than “scenes of sensuality<sup>9</sup>.” See too, how the sense of the word “sensual” has been narrowed, as sensuality has been siphoned from all but the most private of moments; then we shun its remainder as obscene. This is the effect of religion in the broadest possible meaning of the term.

As religion makes a thing of non-being, it must do so using symbols (an offence in itself to non-being; only silence expresses both the appropriate awe and disinterest before the abyss), and so religion has been an important trainer in the realm of symbolic thought. Once we have been hoodwinked into following rituals that allude to something without any sensual reality, we

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<sup>8</sup> In section I.4 I will make clear my distinction between “universal” and “absolute.”

<sup>9</sup> One of the descriptions sometimes used to explain film ratings.

will find it easy to accept as basic the use of symbols for quality bearing things (i.e. as the representative expression of universals formed from previously immediate particulars). Language, or verbal-conceptual practice, is the essence of symbolic thought. Take, as trite example, the word-symbol, “my mug”: it symbolizes the fuller experiential bundle,<sup>10</sup> “warm-smooth-white-red-curved-hollowed.” Of course, even this “bundle” must be *described*, if it is to be described at all, in universals; the real thing manifests in infinite detail. So, I have not purported to provide anyone with an immediate experience of my mug, only to *symbolize* the difference between symbolic and immediate cognition. There is, admittedly, little (though perhaps something) to be lost in the reification and symbolization of my mug, but when this same process applies inevitably (for it becomes the form our cognizance) to every aspect of our lives —human relations, nourishment, *aesthetic appreciation* — what is lost? When I see a friend, I see him first as his name and as “friend” rather than for himself. He becomes my object, and thing in my set of categories, precluding any sort of genuine relation, a point similar to that made by Martin Buber in his work *I and Thou*. Along the same lines, when I look at forest instead of being filled with its particular qualities, my mind immediately sets to understanding it in *terms* (of *some* particular outside set of terms: lumber-value, ecosystem, etc.). In this way we become alienated from the real world.

### 3- Inequality & Material Life

What is the origin of symbolic culture, the material conditions that gave rise to its growth? It was first *agriculture*, Zerzan argues. Agriculture had the effect of separating man from

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<sup>10</sup> The term “bundle,” as a standard translation of the Buddhist “skhanda.”

the world; rather than living in nature, he began to dominate; so began a relationship of struggle rather than symbiosis. Once separate from the world, once schemes were required to control and manipulate it, symbol became necessary as the organizational principle for these complex activities, and of human life in general. Man first separated himself from the world in this way, and so began the possibility of domination; you cannot dominate what is immediate to you, because without separation there can be no dialectic of control. As he domesticated the natural world, man developed also the ability to domesticate man.

Thus, the second necessity for symbol — not only as a tool for domination of nature, but as a balm for domesticated man, a replacement for the connection he had lost and a distraction from his growing enslavement to a small number of domesticators. Symbolic culture grew out of material inequality among men. Of course, if Zerzan is to show that inequality began with agriculture, he must show that there was relative equality beforehand. To do so, he draws on relatively recent archeological and anthropological theories which have begun to dislodge the traditional Hobbesian image of primitive man running idiotically about with his bone club, in a short, brutish life.<sup>11</sup>

If we are to accept any division in society to be *primordial*<sup>12</sup> tradition dictates that it is the distinction between the sexes.<sup>13</sup> So, if we can show even that societal division to be a relatively recent — a post-agricultural — phenomenon, we have begun to make a case for the deleterious effect of civilization on the material lives of those bound to it. Zerzan points first to a *lessening* of physical dimorphism between the sexes in early human evolution: specifically that the

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<sup>11</sup> Though some presentation of evidence for the superiority of primitive life-styles characterizes almost all of Zerzan's writing, his essay the "The Future Primitive" deals exclusively and in detail with his arguments to this effect. It can be found either at <http://www.primitivism.com/future-primitive.htm> or in *Future Primitive*

<sup>12</sup> "Primordial" in *either* a historical or, for the most stringent traditionalists among us, analytic sense.

<sup>13</sup> Though for Nietzsche it is the distinction between the weak and the strong — a point I shall come to shortly.

difference in physical stature and the size of canine teeth was reduced in early humans as compared to other apes,<sup>14</sup> possibly indicating the absence of domination by males over females during mating in early humanity. Furthermore, changes in our understanding of the Paleolithic diet suggest greater gender-equality than had been previously imagined. It would be more accurate to term early humanity a *gatherer-hunter*, rather than a *hunter-gatherer*, as the human diet, perhaps just prior to 10,000-30,000 years ago, was overwhelmingly plant-based. Therefore, *if we are to assume* that Paleolithic women acted as gatherers, then we cannot hold also that they were dependent on male hunters for their sustenance; even then, there is no archeological evidence at all to indicate that there was *actually* a gender gap in gathering and hunting; that is a purely modern supposition.<sup>15</sup> In fact, contemporary “primitive” peoples show far greater egalitarianism between the sexes than much of the “civilized” world. For instance, among the !Kung bushmen, it is common for boys and girls to play the same games together. Later in life, women have at least as much control over marriage and other sexual relationships as men have. Anthropologists also discovered that rape is apparently very uncommon among the !Kung.<sup>16</sup>

Is there not, however, still a natural difference between the strong and the weak? Without laws, what is to prevent the strongest members of primitive, or any, society from abusing, manipulating and enslaving the rest? What prevents tribal conflict? Zerzan counters — *What is there to fight over?* In gatherer-hunter society, direct control over large plots of land is unnecessary; this is a source of conflict originating with agriculture. Implements are basic enough that anyone can make them with relative ease and resources gathered are ubiquitous; all

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<sup>14</sup> That is, with a reduction in male size as compared to female

<sup>15</sup> Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 17-18.

<sup>16</sup> Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, 40-41.

you have to do is go pick up your food, and after hundreds of thousands of years of gathering, Paleolithic man seemed to have developed a reliable ability to find sustenance, given the wide and sufficiently nutritional variety of products consumed. Extortion and conflict over resources, therefore, would barely have been worth the effort, if at all. In the absence of significant symbolic culture, culture formed of abstract morals or divine commands, what other reason would primitive peoples have to fight each other? Little if any. Archeological evidence corroborates Zerzan's logic for material equality in primitive man, based on an even distribution of preserved goods among prehistorical campsites. Findings in contemporary anthropology also support this conclusion, the !Kung being, once again, a prime example. Interpersonal violence is regarded as vile, and is never depicted in their dance or play.<sup>17</sup>

Traditionally it has been asked why it took man so long, until about 10,000 years ago, to develop agriculture. It is unlikely due to inferior mental capacity, as shown by archeological study. Anthropologist Thomas Wynn claims that a 1.7 million year old stone axe found in Olduvai gorge, because of the 3-dimensional visualization required for its manufacture, must have been made by someone with intelligence roughly equal to a modern human's. Even 2 million years ago, most stone tools show signs of having been crafted by the someone right handed, right (or left) handedness being an indication of lateralization in the brain, which is a feature distinctive of human intelligence.<sup>18</sup> If not because of inferior intellect, we may ask why *did it take so long for man to develop agriculture?* Zerzan proposes that the right question is why they developed it at all, given the relative equality and material contentment of early man. He suggests that it required a "glacially slow" development of specialization in advance, becoming

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<sup>17</sup> Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, P 36.

<sup>18</sup> Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, P 20-23.

noticeable roughly 15,000 years ago. This division of society grew until some members gathered enough strength over others to coerce or bamboozle them into a proto-agricultural way of life, which would make it more profitable for a few to control the hard labor of many others.<sup>19</sup> With agriculture, more division was required, and the ruling shamanic practitioners gained power by manipulating symbol to make tolerable the new regime of “drudgery, sexual inequality [and] warfare...”<sup>20</sup> This led to more symbol, which paved the way for more material suffering, which in turn paved the way for even more symbolic alienation, and the rest is history in its entirety.

#### 4- Primitivism & Postmodernism

Zerzan’s form of primitivism is antithetical to the postmodernist viewpoint. The essential difference is this: In primitivism, symbol distorts & degrades reality, while in postmodernism, symbol constitutes reality. Jean Baudrillard describes the latter in his book *Simulation and Simulacrum*.<sup>21</sup> The postmodern ethos is one of rootless pastiche; ideas and events are rearranged ahistorically and their significance is no more or less than what we can convince people that their significance is, and there is no reality outside of this pastiche.

Zerzan criticizes the postmodernists — or as he sometimes calls them, the *passive nihilists* — on the grounds that their theory is unproductive, and that it serves as a legitimization of this or any other status quo. It serves the status quo, first, in that it tends to exhort a relativism in which no state is really morally better than any other, and second in that it elevates mind over matter such that “material suffering” becomes an oxymoron; suffering is entirely mental, so

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<sup>19</sup> Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, P 24.

<sup>20</sup> Zerzan, *Future Primitive*, P 28.

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

material conditions cannot actually be bad; we can only think badly of them. Is it enough to reply, “*Then let them idle in their misery and call it joy; we will free ourselves in the meantime*”? Probably not, given the degree to which passive nihilism has become both widespread, and widely accepted — Perhaps one piece of evidence for this acceptance is the attitude of psychologists toward “depression,” that it is a disease distinct from the rest of that individual’s psychological makeup and personality, and as such can be simply “cut out” using medication leaving the individual with a genuine and unafflicted self. That is to say, if we are unhappy, it is not really us who is unhappy (that would be sick, or morbid); we ought to be happy, because “we” can be.

Moral relativism is rather a popular theory of late, not only among brutes who think that the ontological absence of justification is a *justification for* cruelty, but also among the caring who think that, because there are no universal morals, we *ought to* leave others be in their social practices. They think that the vacuity of universals, of metaphysics, is itself a metaphysical grounding for ethical universals. These “egalitarian” relativists are — if Kant was a *cunning Christian*<sup>22</sup> — *utterly godless* Christians (or at least theists of a roughly Spinozaen variety) who attempt to found an ethics on their own confusion and perdition<sup>23</sup>. We do not need God to tell us what is vile to look upon, what is cruel and ugly. We do not need God to tell us that we suffer, or that we are joyful. The relativist is of course entitled to the moral intuition that interfering with others is wrong, and so not do so, but they have also given up their right to convince others through rational discourse to practice the same. If nobody really ought to anything, and if follows rationally from nothing that we ought do some particular, then not particular state of things,

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<sup>22</sup> as Nietzsche terms him in *Twilight of the Idols*

<sup>23</sup> In a literal sense of the etymology — *lostness*.

especially a lack of ought, can stand as the basis for some particular ought, including that of tolerance.

The conceptual source<sup>24</sup> of this confusion is, partially, the undue conflation of the *universal* and the *absolute*, as well as of metaphysical and cognitive universals. It is one thing to think that there absolute categories, or universals, defined *a priori*, and another to accept that we think in terms of particular categories (*whether* they are socially conditioned *or* logically necessitated). The absolute is the way in which a thing participate in such a *cognitive universal*; doubt about the accuracy of my senses aside, I may say that as I perceive it, my paperclip participates absolutely in the quality of green — that is, I cannot doubt that my paperclip as I see it is green, even though I could doubt the constancy of my visual faculties such that in the future I will reidentify that paperclip as red.

Let us now think of categories of value, and say that all things can be valued either *good* or *bad*, not good or *evil*, but good or bad in the same sense as when we value the taste of a wine as good or bad; there may be degrees of either quality, yet we must term it some degree of one or the other. So if I take a sip of wine and say “this tastes very good,” I mean that it does *in fact* taste good. I am not in doubt about this, nor could I be. I might take another sip and find I dislike the taste, and then it would not taste good, but it still would have tasted genuinely good before. Perhaps if I had developed my tastes differently I would not have liked the wine, but then it *could have been* different. “It cannot be different” and “It could not have been different” possess completely separate meanings. The latter is to suppose that my taste for wine is determined a

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<sup>24</sup> As opposed to the source in terms of historical causality, which is immaterial to my argument against their position, though I suspect its source lies in the victories of symbolic religion, substance dualism and particularly monotheism.

priori, while the former only affirms my judgment of it as real, or true, in that I cannot think of the wine as bad.

Consider now those judgments we typically term as *moral*. Sacrificing good taste for a moment, imagine that you witness the vicious, pointless murder of a mother and her small child. You cannot deny (let us hope) your revulsion, your horror, your sense of *badness*; Your distaste is *absolutely* real. If you had been brought up differently you might not have been repulsed; you might have been the murderer, but this does not make your revulsion — your negative valuation — unreal, only non-metaphysically universal. It is absurd then for the relativists to claim that their valuations lack reality merely because others have different valuations in the same way it would be for me to claim that my taste for wine was unreal or unimportant simply because I might not have liked it.

Let us now pass to the problem of extreme “mind over matter.” To one who claims that there is no reality outside of symbol, let us remind him that symbol is of matter (except for religious symbol, which is of nothing at all), and matter obeys its own laws. We may tame matter with symbolic rules, that is through our description or redescription of the laws of matter as we understand them (e.g. physics), and this may change the way we experience the world, but it can only do so within limits. So, we cannot issue an emergency redefinition of “tidal wave” or “city” to prevent one from destroying the other. The hiker cannot thoroughly redefine “bear attack” when it best suits him. Therefore, the world is not one of infinite possibility; we do not have such control over our symbolization that we can employ it to alleviate all suffering. From time to time, we may be forced to act.

## 5- Zerzan on Art <sup>25</sup>

In general, Zerzan is distrustful of art as a product of culture; in fact, he claims that no art existed prior to 30,000 years ago, because no one needed its balm, finding quite enough beauty in nature. Even then, he does not acknowledge most art are as either successfully recuperative or authentic. Representational art, he believes, is a step removed from reality; it can only imitate objects in the world, distancing us in the end from the real thing. In this sense he is operating on a modified Platonic hierarchy, with objects in the world as ultimate, and ideas mere derivative; on this scheme, art is a form of idea, another derivative symbol.<sup>26</sup> So, when we look at a picture of a forest, or mountain, or the ocean, we are merely being appeased with something of lesser value than the real thing, and at the same time being hoodwinked into believing that it is great — same when we look at images of people.

The one form of art that Zerzan does claim to appreciate (with the exception of a vague reference to punk music) is abstract expressionism. This abstract art differs from representational varieties in that its beauty is immediate, rather than based in its symbolic value. A Jackson Pollock painting,<sup>(a)</sup> for instance, has purely internal aesthetic relationships and is appreciated no differently that we would appreciate some pattern in nature. For this reason he takes abstract expressionism are to be both more beautiful and, in a sense, more *real* than other forms of art; it generates, at least, a more real experience.

This and any other Platonic view of art, any that understands it as a derivative representation somehow lacking in reality, is not without challenge. Arthur Danto lays out a very

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<sup>25</sup> from Zerzan's "Abstract Expressionism: Painting as Vision and Critique," *Running On Emptiness*, 95-108.

<sup>26</sup> Where as the Platonic hierarchy was, from most to least real: Idea/Form>The World>Art

convincing alternative account in his essay “The Artworld.”<sup>27</sup> Danto invented his new theory precisely to defend the increasingly abstract and non-representational body of art being generated in the twentieth century. For instance, if the end of art was to accurately represent something, how could a painting such as Egon Schiele’s *Tote Mutter*,<sup>(a)</sup> much less anything of Pollock’s,<sup>(b)</sup> be understood as good art, if art at all? In what sense does Schiele’s painting actually depict a mother and her infant? Danto holds that each work of art generates its own, individual reality. This is actually easier to understand in terms of purely abstract work such as Pollock’s; what he has created, as Zerzan rightly holds, is an experience in itself, a new material form so to speak. Danto’s real challenge is to show that past art, ostensibly representational art, has functioned in the same way. To take a simple tack<sup>28</sup>, consider the Romantic era painting *Der Sturm*.<sup>(c)</sup> How could the colors on canvas properly “imitate” a wave? Waves are large, wet and three dimensional; the paint is not so large, hopefully dry and its image two-dimensional. What we mean then when we say that there is a wave in the painting is that there are sets of colors we are *calling* a wave. Within the painting’s locus of meaning, that is a wave, but it does not purport to be or imitate a wave. It should not make the experience of the painting inferior to our experience of the real world that we identify its wave as a wave based on its similarities to waves we have seen in the world, at least not *any more* than the naming of actual waves as such diminishes the immediacy of our experiencing them. The fact that we experience art based on our knowledge of the world does not mean that art is *mere derivative* of the “real world.”

If we understand art in terms of our past experiences, just as we understand all our future experiences in such terms, might we not also understand the world partially in terms of the art we

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<sup>27</sup> Danto, Arthur, “The Artworld.”

<sup>28</sup> One which Danto doesn’t actually take, but which I think makes his point equally well

experience? This is the notion advanced by Nicholas Cook, based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.<sup>29</sup> So, for example, Schiele's depiction of a mother with her infant will alter the way we see mothers in the future; perhaps we will (re)cognize something of the sad, almost nostalgic adoration in the eye's of Schiele's *Mutter*, as the shadows wrap her in a pattern resembling the infants swaddling clothes. This process is even easier to apprehend in poetry. Take the lines from Eliot, "I have seen them riding seaward on the waves/combing the white hair of the waves blown back/when the wind blows the water white and black."<sup>30</sup> Having read those lines, we might see an anima, as well as a startling black-white contrast, that we had never before seen in the waves. The very purpose of metaphor is to conjoin disparate images in order alter the way we understand each. So when Hopkins writes of a kestrel, "How he wrung upon the reign of a wimpling wing/ in his ecstasy,"<sup>31</sup> we might perceive an archaic nobility to the flight of birds previously unavailable to us. Art, then, is not only non-derivative, but shapes our world in new and sometimes beautiful ways which we could otherwise never experience.

## 6- Mediation Revisited

I have argued above that it is a mistake to separate symbol and experience when looking at art, to understand art as some real object separated from our experience by a painting. It is likewise an error to separate symbol and experience *in our experience*. To draw on the original formulation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, symbol is not a veil over sensation, but that which shapes it; language is the form of our sensations.

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<sup>29</sup> Simply put, the idea that the limits of our language condition our experience

<sup>30</sup> Eliot, T.S., "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

<sup>31</sup> Hopkins, Gerard Manley, "The Windhover: to Christ Our Lord"

I shall not try to argue that symbolic thought either is natural to humans (i.e. that humans must think symbolically), nor that symbolic thought is essential to awareness, nor even defend language, ritual and past-future bound cognition as *equally* joyful to some potential non-symbolic mode of thought. Each of these theses is beyond my expertise. Indeed, I confess that symbolic cognition is full of ugliness which would be otherwise impossible: anxiety, domination, warfare, regret and existential desolation.

Nevertheless, the symbolic mode of thought is not without its redemptive qualities. Redemptive enough to make it worth the negatives? No one shall ever know, for one in a non-symbolic state cannot understand a symbolic one, and the symbolic cognizer can say nothing truly comprehensible about non-conceptual being. So what does symbol bestow on our being? Along with every woe there is a dizzying height of feeling that comes from the ability to hope and expect, or to attribute value (positive or negative) beyond the immediate qualities of our experience.

I have already discussed art; without symbol there would be no Michelangelo or Munch, Rachmaninoff or Neruda, nor Yeats, nor Verdi. How much beauty would we lack without symbol? There would be no such thing as beauty. And is there not a pleasure unique to the fulfillment of expectation, a peculiar joy that goes beyond the immediate fulfillment of the anticipated desire. Consider also the trinkets we receive from friends; their value may reference their sensual qualities but it is not identical; we see those absent reflected in what they leave us. And is there no more fabricated, no more synthesized an amalgamation than this notion-- *romantic love*? In reference to the immediate, how is it more than deep caring in conjunction with sexual desire? Yet, it seems to blend both together, being neither one nor the other — and each individually is itself a complex concept. This is all to make the point that there are pleasures

at which immediate, atemporal, non-conceptual consciousness cannot even begin to grasp.

But let us look around at the world a minute — where is all *this joy*? How often has the mass of men stopped murdering each other long enough to gather, ecstatic, before the great art of the world? Instead we make war. Instead we destroy the natural world. Instead we deceive and manipulate for our own petty gain. We watch reality television, *Fear Factor* — a lazy, witless sadism from a public lacking even the dignity to demand more potent opiates.

I cannot pretend to know the source of *all* this, but *it is not culture* itself. The !Kung have culture, for they have *social prohibitions* against domination and egotism,<sup>32</sup> yet they also have peace and freedom and leisure. It seems that part of our degeneration, then, is the lust of the few for *unbridled* sensual delight. For that purpose they dominate the rest of humanity. They hand out the anti-sensual values of religion and the afterlife, of asceticism, to ensure that others have *moral fear* to compete with them. Eventually the genuine appreciation of religion, by and large, withered as the masses of the “developed world” began to achieve some measure of wherewithal. So *consumerism* replaced medieval Christianity. People think that consumerism is a means to fulfill their sensual desires; it would be illogical for the contemporary producers of our popular culture to generate a fulfilling culture, for once fulfilled we would not longer need to so frantically consume. This is at least part of the problem; undoubtedly there is more. Yet still, much would be repaired in the Western world if we could shake of the desire to generate our symbolic being, our personal culture, through the unlimited purchase of goods designed to *satisfy* no one.

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<sup>32</sup> Migotti, Mark, “Slave Morality, Socrates, and the Bushmen: A Reading of the First Essay of On the Genealogy of Morals.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 58 No. 4, 1998.



(a) Egon Schiele's *Tote Mutter*



(b) Jackson Pollock's *Raven(2)*



(c) William Etty's *Der Sturm*

## Part II. Embodied Idealism on Postmodern Consumer Culture

*“Eli Eli Lama sabachthani”*

### 1- Human Essence

So far I used Zerzan to draw out into sight a number of problems with our society, but have in the end rejected what he takes to be the metaphysical bases for those problems. What is left for me to do then is to provide an alternate metaphysics, such that we can identify the cause of our societal ills. If the symbolic is not inherently alienating, then the symbolic is not that cause, and so our response will not be an effort to eliminate the symbolic; the metaphysical account of our ills will prescribe, or at least hint at, the appropriate treatment for them.

I propose, then, that there is a certain pan-universal structure to being. We could, after all, imagine a universe without water particles. There are, nonetheless, sorts of universes which we cannot imagine. The existence of a world in which reside a collection of oft-cited square circles and hexagonal triangles, for instance, is a pan-universal impossibility. Allow me to clarify, before I am accused of mistaking my own epistemological and cognitive limits for a metaphysics. When I hold that there is a certain pan-universal structure to being, what I mean by “being” is no more (or less) than “existence as we know it.” Perhaps there is some being for which a square circle or a world of infinite multiplicity poses no contradiction. I am profoundly doubtful that any human could participate in such being, but I leave it to the reader to determine whether what I write, as far as the structure of being is concerned, rings true qua the limits of their own cognition.

Needless to say, a great many thinkers have given accounts of what it is to exist-at-all in

our world. Three of these are Marx, Nietzsche<sup>33</sup> and Sartre, and their theories of human nature — at least as far as structure is concerned — can be synthesized into one theory, could be understood, even, as no more than varied expressions of the same essential idea. There are two reasons to begin by recapitulating the theories of these three thinkers, rather than letting my own account of being stand on its own (which I maintain that it does): One, it was these theories (along with Heidegger's) which prompted me to pursue my own in the same style; Two, and more importantly, the fact that these accounts can be synthesized together, particularly the apparently opposed theories of Nietzsche and Marx, suggests that there is in fact a shared structure to being for us to discern.<sup>34</sup>

For Marx, man is the species being, the being which produces itself. In *The German Ideology* he writes,

Man can be distinguished from the animal by consciousness, religion, or anything else you please. He begins to distinguish himself from the animal the moment he begins to produce his means of subsistence, a step required by his physical organization. By producing food, man indirectly produces his material life itself... The way in which man produces his food depends first of all on the nature of the means of subsistence that he finds and has to reproduce. This mode of production must not be viewed simply as reproduction of the physical existence of individuals. Rather it is a definite form of their activity, a definite way of expressing their life, a definite mode of life. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with what they produce and how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions which determine their production.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Given the ambiguity involved in Nietzsche's texts, I will do no purport to explicate what Nietzsche himself actually thought, merely one position which he appears to have propounded at a particular time.

<sup>34</sup> Much of my own interpretations and language is embedded in the following recapitulations. For instance, as far as I am aware Marx and Engels did not use the language of "order and chaos." I do this in order to pre-establish certain links between my own understandings and those of these thinkers, so that in giving my own account I do not have to constantly interrupt it with my applicable interpretations of Marx, Sartre and Nietzsche.

<sup>35</sup> Marx & Engels, "The German Ideology," *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 107

The material being of animals<sup>36</sup> unlike that of man is relatively fixed, for man (or, to speak more broadly, the conscious being) is differentiated in that he can create new objects, expanding the powers available to him. The ant is stuck with its mandibles, the groundhog its paws, for tunneling. Once humans relied on their hands, then on shovels, and now on backhoes; we can do a great deal more than we once could have — a great many more activities are open to us. Consider that being is not static, but in flux. We are constantly becoming, and the way in which we become is identical with our activities. We may alter our activities by the creation of new tools; thus, we produce ourselves as we produce objects in the world. Our fundamental activity is the creation of novel forms.

What enables us to create new forms (or the faculty which is identical with our creating new forms) is our cognition in species. The ability to cognize in taxonomies is the essence of creativity, for in uttering “this-and-not-that” we strip off one strand of a primordial, formless and inconceivable chaos and name it; thus we have created the primary duality, that of order and chaos; we live always in the realm of order which is the realm of species itself. Within the realm of order new objects proliferate as the strand pulled from chaos, the strand we call “existence” is divided and subdivided. Within existence there are no true dualities, only spectrums whose ends head toward duality but never reach them; we might call these the faux-dualities *in existence*. Yet, these dualities are *of existence*, and these are alternate expressions of the primary duality (that of form and formlessness) Among them is the subject-object duality; in naming the first strand separated from chaos the self springs into being, for cognition is given content and the self acquires the form of its multiplying objects. The subject is a formlessness observing and ordering

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<sup>36</sup> Just as I recognize that there may be non-human species being, I recognize also that there may be creatures traditionally falling among “the animals” who act at least as proto-species-beings. “The animals” I merely take as a short hand for those creatures whose species-cognition is negligible or non-existent.

itself in the form of its objects; Yet it has taxonomized itself from those objects in creating itself through them, for it has called one the formed and the other formless. It observes itself and is never one with itself. From here we derive may derive Marx's claim that,

The animal is *its life activity*. Man makes his life activity into an object of will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he immediately identifies. Only thereby is he a species-being. Or rather, he is only a conscious being — that is, his own life is an object for him — since he is a species being. Only on that account is his activity free activity.<sup>37</sup>

As man makes, manipulates and alters things (backhoes, pomegranate juice, thumbscrews, bodies including his own) he also makes himself, *and through* making these things he makes himself.

Unlike the animals, he is free to produce himself just as much as he is able to produce a footstool or a firearm, a book or a garden salad as he pleases. Man's freedom lies, then, in the fact that the structure of species-cognition enables him to create the content of his being as he will.

Now, is this not to say that existence proceeds essence? Sartre writes that, "First of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterward, defines himself. If man is indefinable...it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be."<sup>38</sup> That is, man is formless to begin with and gathers shape as he creates himself in the world. Man creates not just himself but the other and the beyond-the-self. Again from Sartre,

When we say that man chooses his own self, we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that that in making his choice he also chooses all men. In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is no single one of our own acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be...We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Marx & Engels, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (Selections)," Karl Mark: Selected Writings, ed. Edward Simon, Hackett Publishing 1994, p. 63

<sup>38</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

Starting with what this *does not* mean — It does *not* mean that, because I usually eat a sandwich with cucumbers, tomatoes, pepperoni, salami and provolone for lunch at 12:15, I therefore want every one else in the world to eat a sandwich with cucumbers, tomatoes, pepperoni, salami and provolone at 12:15 (in the same dining hall I frequent). This would make the line unbearably long, and the tomatoes would probably go bad long before I go to them, if there were any left at all. For a less trite example, it does not mean that when David Berkowitz murdered six individuals that he wanted everyone to go out and murder six human beings; his notion of the good for man was based in his being uniquely over and above other people. Still, Man makes a type of himself, shall we say a species for whom the good applies; he universalizes from some particular action a rule that this action embodies how the world ought to be. These values are embodied in his action, and is his very being; man as he makes himself is co-existent with his embodied value.

We might also associate the existentialist notion of bad faith, a dishonesty about one's relationship with the world, with Marx's alienation. On the face of it this seems implausible, considering the following excerpts from *Existentialism and Human Emotions*:

One can still pass judgment, for, as I have said, one makes a choice in relationship to others. First, one can judge (and this is perhaps not a judgment of value but a logical judgment) that certain choices are based on error and others on truth. If we have defined man's situation as a free choice, with no excuses and no recourses, every man who takes refuge behind the excuse of his passions, every man who sets up a determinism is a dishonest man.<sup>40</sup>

This appears to preclude any attempt to explain bad faith in terms of something else as being in bad faith itself. That is, if bad faith occurs in the denial of our freedom, and if we attempt to give

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 44-45

a history of why we experience ourselves as unfree, we are in bad faith, because we are denying that we have the freedom to be free; however, there is a difference between excuse and explanation. By giving an account of why we seem to lack freedom we do not affirm that viewpoint as “just fine,” but identify what must change to help us to live more authentic lives. Returning to the parity between Marx and Sartre, a significant element of alienation for Marx is the state in which man does not “own” what he produces (because he does not own the means to produce it), and in as his self-production is embodied in his material production, he no longer owns himself; he has become something foreign to himself, caught up in and overwhelmed by the other. It is reasonable to expect that such a state would lead to a sense of lost freedom. That is not to say that Sartre and Marx think identically on this issue, for Marx would hold that freedom is genuinely lost, whereas Sartre would say that it only has the appearance of being lost. We might still try to reconcile their ideas by distinguishing Sartre’s description as a phenomenological one, whereas Marx’s describes a situation “historically” with regard to unfreedom as the opposite pole of self-ownership. This issue aside, there are definite similarities between Marx’s and Sartre’s accounts of the structures of human-being.

Nietzsche too, at least in “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” presents creativity as essential to being. For him truth is created through “the metamorphosis of the world into man,”<sup>41</sup> and elsewhere that as a “genius of construction man raises himself far above the bee in the following way: whereas the bee builds with the wax that he gathers from nature, man builds with far more delicate conceptual material.”<sup>42</sup> Finally, “It is only by means of the rigid and regular web

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<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” *The Nietzsche Reader*, 119.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 118

of concepts that the waking man clearly sees.”<sup>43</sup> As with Marx, the creation of abstracts embodied in the world creates not only the world but man himself, as man transforms the world into himself by working on it.

Man must make himself from the world, because for Nietzsche too he lacks being beyond his substantive embodiments. This is rooted in, or at least supported significantly by, Nietzsche’s collapse of subject and object as independent entities. He asks rhetorically, “What gives me the right to speak of an ego, and even of an ego as cause, and finally of an ego as the cause of thought?”<sup>44</sup> The unification of the subject and the object factors into his thought in various other ways; for instance, the notion that we cannot respect someone simply for being a subject can be traced conceptually back to the impossibility of finding a subject to respect beyond its embodied value. Likewise, the dictum *amor fati* urges us to love our own fate such to affirm life, because there is no living subject over and above our particular fate. We see from this, that like Marx and Sartre, being for Nietzsche is the interrelation of the subject (the abstraction of the pure abstract) and object (the abstraction of the pure particular).

What is to be taken from this synthesis of metaphysics is that the human-being is that being which is always already making itself through kinds; it is the being which makes itself in its world. Combing this with the Heideggerian thesis that we are always in a mood, then in always being disposed to the world in some way, we are always disposed to some taxonomized, or taxonomically *formed*, thing, in some way. We create the world and its significance.

## 2- Man the Neurotic

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 121

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Basic Writings of Nietzsche, 214.

So far, however, I have only given a half of the story, the half wherein man creates the world as he will (his will is the world, and his world the will). I have given an account of the ordering of the world; however, this ordering involves per force a limit to the forming, even as form is existence itself. Formation is founded in limit, in the this-and-not-that of thingness. Yet, the mind cannot work causelessly, *ex nihilo*, and even if it does existence does not manifest itself to us as such, for we do not have infinite choice as to the way the world is. Thus *the absolute*, the inability to doubt or shift the placement of certain sense stimuli under certain categories. This lack of choice is necessary to formation, for all things being equal in themselves our taxonimization would have no content to order, the result would be a formless lack of being. The predetermination of our choice through our mood toward content is the essence of our choice. It is not so much that we create the world, but that the world creates itself through us. Things have form and significance only in as much as we give it to them, yet at the same time what we give the world of things is not of our own will, but belonged to them before we gave it. We might say that our consciousness is the officiation of being's self-bestowal.

Still without this officiation all essences remain ungiven, and in this sense we are always already, at least, a tad neurotic. We speak (as we must) of things and their importance as if they truly are those things and truly have that importance. Even as we call the obsessive compulsive individual neurotic, or disregard as hallucinations what some individual claims to perceive, we are constantly officiating the world as we will, officiating a significance into it, which without us it would not have. There are two abstract senses in which we do not "really" have values: one in which the values are only officiated by us but not our own, belonging to the world; the other, in which there is no value without us and so it lacks its own "true" being. Each of these contradicts the very possibility of reality, yet in their combination (when they cease to be

abstracted from one another) reality itself is born. Being, then, is underlain by this contradiction which arises out of the primary duality (order/chaos, form/formlessness) of existence. Here we begin to unravel the genuine metaphysical bases for what Zerzan finds so problematic about conceptual being.

There is, tied up with this contradiction, the absoluteness of abstracts even as their reality is dependent on their embodiment. To paraphrase Sartre on man's desire to get beyond his subjectivity, our universals strain always against their embodiment; we struggle always toward transcendence, in which our universals become absolute not just cognitively speaking (I.e. we cannot doubt the way in which sensory and emotive-valuative stimuli appear to us) but break free of their embodiment, and us with them to become God. In short —we experience at once the absolute reality of our values and at the same time their ontological dependence on particular embodiment. Again — the primary duality itself is unstable, chaos leaking into, indeed giving content to, the form of reason.

Among our moods toward being is anxiety. Thus, if provoked to a certain sort of reasoning wherein neurosis becomes aware of itself (i.e. a concept of the contradiction of conceptuality develops), the fact of our neurosis may become a source of anxiety — a form of anxiety which I here term *angst*. We may vacillate between two poles of neurotic angst, never fully achieving one or the other: we start out valuing and taking as real our own concepts, but concept turns back upon itself; as we link concept to concept we find an endpoint, a limit to our rationality — we come to our basic principles, and when we ask ourselves “why?” we find no answer and the ability of the web of concepts to support itself breaks down. Yet, when we try to resign ourselves it is impossible, for we take another principle in doing so — that on ought to resign oneself. Then we flee back toward the world of self-ignorant neurosis, of the solidity of

our concepts, but we return haunted by the ultimate abstract; our concepts can never again, except for the forgetful, appear to us without a gnawing sense of illusion and we still feel ourselves in contradiction.

This neurotic epiphany might be set in motion when we come across some specific contradiction in the world, which leads us to question not just the content, but the entire framework of our being. This is possible because man, in being rational, is the irrational animal. We are the only beings that come up with concepts to work in contradiction with each other at all. Our rational faculty organizes various stimuli into concepts — such as good and bad. We might for example hold that sadistic serial killers are bad, a stain on existence even, and feel that they should be removed from it; at the same time, we think destroying human beings is bad. Now our concepts come into conflict with one another and we are forced to abandon one. But if some concept was ill-formed, we begin to question the whole structure of our concept formation.

As concepts are real to us, in fact embodied, we care about them as things and as part of ourselves; both our happiness, but also our suffering, can become deeper and more multifaceted than can any posited non-conceptual being's. For example, I may reflect on the fact of my having friends in terms of the specific experiences (laughter, comfort, argument — each of these, of course, a sub-concept) and take pleasure in those experiences both in and of themselves and in terms of the concept of friendship they embody; that is, the conceptual being can take pleasure in the fact of having friends at all. Such a being, however, can also suffer from not only unpleasantness of arguing in itself, but then upon reflection from concern for the significance of the argument for my having friends, even my capacity for friendship. Ever worse off is the conceptual being with a notion of friendship who has no friends at all, and suffers not only the lack of positive experiences with others, but also from the knowledge that he might have friends

to compensate for this and does not.

The conceptual being we see then has the capacity for *longing*. Explaining this capacity in terms of the particular and the abstract — It is not to say that the concept is unembodied in that being's life, for without embodiment the concept becomes nothing. Keep in mind, this does not require a complete set of *originating* particulars from which we make our concept. As Bertrand Russel argues, we may assemble concepts of which we do not have personal experience from sets of predicates with which we have interacted. This is how I have a concept of a unicorn — I have experienced particulars from which I get the concept of a horn and a horse, from which I assemble in turn the concept of the unicorn. Likewise, I have ideas of historical incidents based on contemporary particulars. Considering again the friendless being, he will learn of the concept of friendship from some outside source, and embodies it with particulars from his experience. His longing then is not for the filling up of a hollow concept of friendship with particulars, but with particulars which are better in some sense. Perhaps because he perceives the particular happiness of the befriended as one of the particulars embodied in the concept of friendship, he then longs for a set of particulars which will arrange the concept of friendship such to include, or cause, his own happiness as a constituent of that concept — and this will be accomplished by making friends.

Another peculiar trouble for man is his coming up against the limits of his power. I do not mean by this just that man has limited power, or that the world of things obeys certain rules; rather I mean both at once, for the limits of our own power to change the world is identical to the casual powers of the matter with which we interact. A contradiction emerges here too, for we see chaos peeking into the world through the edifice of natural law. As we seek to create ourselves

through the re-embodiment<sup>45</sup> of our concepts in the world, we discover a contradiction between our concepts as embodied in amalgamated particulars and our ability to re-embody them. When this happens, the concepts at once remains embodied in particulars and fails to be embodied, and our faith is challenged.

I say faith, for man is the primordial idolater, the natural fetishize.<sup>46</sup> He is always already at risk of creating God, for he cannot make himself God. As Sartre points out, our concepts and values can never transcend their embodiment as we are trapped with them. As long as we treat our conceptualized world as meaningful — which we must, we make an idol of it by attributing to it value which is not wholly its own. Then when we become Platonists, and we posit reality as the realm of the abstract, and in so doing we posit God (or universal substance, or any other formulation of the transcendental nonsense — nonsense, of course, in the most technical and respectful sense). Immediately, then, we are at risk for a loss of faith, when a contradiction emerges and concept itself begins to collapse, or is shown once more not to be self-sufficient. For the rationalist, the failure of reason is the deepest crisis of faith; he has lost God. On the other hand, if we then attempt idolize the particular in itself, we find it a contradiction for we attempt to place the concrete in a realm beyond itself.

These are at least some of the ways in which the capacity for conceptual thought can prove harmful — an account roughly in line with this ways in which Zerzan believes symbolic thought damages us as being. I disagree with him in that I am doubtful that we can escape it. This would bring me to a roughly Schopenhaurian estimation of the world as suffering, but I disagree

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<sup>45</sup> For a concept is already embodied in particulars, which may or may not be drawn from a single original source; by creating things in the world, we re-embody them.

<sup>46</sup> Use value, like exchange value, is only given in our officiation of an object's being; in (II.4) I will argue that there are not radical differences in kind between Zerzan's mediate and immediate experiences, and by extension use-versus exchange value. Rather, one is in a particular sense simply better than the other.

with Schopenhauer too, in that — as I have argued — conceptual being is capable of bringing us higher pleasures, as well as deeper suffering, and dare I say...higher suffering?

### 3- Resisting Neurosis

I suggest three basic ways in which man may come to less harm through his neurotic tendencies. Note that these are not necessarily choices, in the sense that we may decide freely between them. Various individuals' psychologies will be better geared towards one and not the others; some will be unable to escape, or even make positive use of, neurosis by any means.

The first way is something akin to Marx's vision of human flourishing. By making themselves and the world through their own creative impulses (in the broadest sense of the term) the adherents of this way of life may forge for themselves a unique and relatively coherent self-identity. Yet, this is not the easiest and least taxing of paths; rather, it would require significant focus and strength of will to keep oneself a single being — and perhaps a good deal of luck in terms of avoiding life-circumstances which provoke a sense of contradiction. Perhaps it also requires ignorance, the ability to pay no mind the smaller contradictions and problems which may lead us eventually to a greater and unrequited wondering. Persons of this path, by these means, are kept happy and sure of themselves; they must also be close-minded and always at risk for falling into neurosis by virtue of the fact that they have not already; there is always the possibility that they will have some experience or experiences through which a contradiction overcomes them.

So many persons, for various reasons (situational or personal), are unable to embody a coherent self and set of values. For them there are two paths available; the first of these is asceticism. They flee the world of contradiction; they withdraw into the subject, purifying it of its

relation to object. Is this possible? For they will always be aware of the world; without eyes they will still hear, and without hearing still feel, and even deprived of all senses still have the mind as an object. The answer is essentially unknowable, for it purports precisely to be beyond the sort of thought which asks “is it like this or that?”. Even the meditator who arrived at such a mode of being would be unaware of it in the moment, for he would have to know that he shifting from some form of existence into another, and a duality would remain. Leaving aside, then, whether the ultimate asceticism is possible, can we approach the limit thereof such to be relatively unharmed by neurosis? There is no reason to think that some persons cannot do so: they identify less and less with the world, by casting off all but the most basic, least unique, material interests; they develop less and less of an embodiment, and so encounter fewer opportunities for contradiction and confusion.

Yet, there are some who may perceive the contradiction in even the smallest experience, who cannot free themselves from it by any means. Is there any path for such persons? Certainly, there is no hope of the traditional “happiness,” but some might make something of contradiction. Indeed, certain philosophical relation may be helped along by neurosis, for as the world appears more and more chaotic, we may begin to perceive what little remains constant. As the content of our experience reveals nothing but disorder, we look through it and find the structure, which remains constant. Might not certain *interesting* art, too, be born from angst — art embodying a futile struggle, for to create once one has found the self incoherent has in it something of the sublime; the creation as the self is both unified and fractured. That is, a grandeur of power and will beyond formative reason pushes the individual to formation. Of course, not every deep neurotic will do either of these things, and some people will simply be without happiness or purpose, but this seems the way of the world; nonetheless, could we not expect that a greater

number of persons to be happy in some sense of the word depending on the conditions into which they were born, as certain conditions are likely to expose their neuroses in certain ways whereas others will not?

#### 4- Consumer Culture

Let us examine first what effect our culture might have on the follower of the first path, the simple person. This sort of person produces himself as a unified concept. In our age, how does this occur, except that he buys himself from others. Work in general is treated as instrumental only to the acquisition of money with which to purchase goods, rather than as an end in itself; therefore this is not the positive self-creation of interest to us here. Therefore, one has little personal-historical relationship to the goods from which one makes oneself. Technology facilitates the appropriation of images from all across the globe, and these are arranged in pastiche (as Jameson describes it) as our aesthetic embodiment of the self. Now, since these objects have little to do with us, except that we desire their appearance, might they not resonate with us entirely, might we not long for a realer connection with the concepts they embody, as the friendless conceptual being longs for a more resonant set of particulars for his notion of friendship? A contradiction has emerged — the self is disjoined from the self. When we ask ourselves, “what have these things to do with us?” we reply “little or nothing.” Since there is no being other than what we create of ourselves, we are disjoined from the whole of (our) being, and we may ask of its entirety “what is it to us?” and having asked this question, we can never return to the coherent self, except by forgetting.

As for asceticism, what could be farther removed from the consumer attitude? Perhaps this makes it all the more necessary, but also all the more difficult. In finding that we cannot

make ourselves in any resonant way, we then aim to complete the self through quantity of quality, constantly adding new facets to the self, in order to forget the emptiness of the old ones, and the ones we added just a moment ago. Consumerism interacts too with the traditional capitalist values it has grown up out of. Once, there was the notion that the self was forged out of a hard day's work, as was the society as a whole. Now the society, in as much as it is equated with the economy, is forged out of consumption — which has itself become a duty, to which work is instrumental; however, the same dignity is associated with he who works to consume a great deal as with he who worked to make the society. Likewise, one is lazy if one does not wish to work in order to consume a great deal. Consequently, asceticism is ideologically opposed, and is rendered more difficult.

So it seems that the first two paths are problematized by our culture, but shouldn't the third flourish? After all, with all the growth of contradiction, our culture should be ripe for the production of philosophy and of interesting art. There are two ways in which this does not quite work out. As stated above, consumer culture provides us with a constant stream of images which help us forget the hollowness of those very images, although we never really succeed in creating ourselves either. This distracts us for long enough that we never transform our contradiction into critical thought. The other problem is that, while society may do well to have some interesting neurotics, the thorough-going neurosis of society is less desirable. For one thing, there are a limited number of people who will actually make something of their neurosis, whereas most will simply be unhappy. Not only this, interestingness in this sense even becomes banal, since it is ubiquitous. We become bored of our complexity and desire to become simple again, but this is an impossibility.

Where, now are we left as far as the anarcho-primitivist concerns we began with,

particularly with the claim that we are alienated into an unreal and unfree life? The fact is that we are not free creators and that the sense of unreality arises directly out of the *actually contradictory* nature of being; however, while contradiction and unfreedom may be the matter of fact, we can be more or less attuned to these facts. As consumer culture tends to make us rootless, we begin to lose the sense of a coherent, genuine self — what we come across then is the truth of our incoherence, and the risk of the world appearing unreal to us. Likewise, as we lose the sense of the self, there is no longer a self to exercise self-creative freedom, thus we become aware, if only dimly, that we are the mere officiators of being, and begin to *feel* unfree. As much as these are problems, they are the problems to be dealt with.

### III. The Manifesto

*"Woe to the thinker who is not the gardener but only the soil of the plants that grow in him."*  
- Nietzsche

#### 1- The Deep Flaw in My Project

Now some may harbor lingering questions about the legitimacy of my entire project, myself first among them, worrying that I have done nothing more than to generalize from my own neuroses to the rest of humanity. As it is, my entire concern is founded on a particular *prejudice*.<sup>47</sup> Such is the assumption that anxiety will be the reaction to a realization of neurosis, for our neurosis may consist not only in anxiety about our forms, but also pleasure, and when

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<sup>47</sup> As Nietzsche uses the term in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

neurosis becomes aware of itself, there is nothing a priori to suggest that it cannot become pleasurable aware of itself. In fact, this might be essence of the third path I described; the self overcomes itself essential contradiction through joy — it was never bothered by its realization of unfreedom at all, and only to the morbid and anxious types does this appear as sublime. More generally, it may simply be a strain of domineering enlightenment error to essentialize anything across an economic or social system, for there are too many different capitalisms (or whatever) to speak of capitalism in general as harmful. To these concerns I make two replies: the first consists in an argument which I offer only gingerly in that it *may*, tenuous as it is, save my claims from the label “nonsense” while leaving them open to the criticism that they are wholly unsubstantiated; the second is merely the suggestion that it is not the place of this sort of project to demonstrate its own truth in this respect, only to make itself available for verification or falsification.

## 2- Essentialism & Anti-Essentialism

I shall deal first with the more general of the two objections to myself I have just raised. For every structure, every systematic set of limitations to the way in which the content of experience can occur or reveal itself, there is a infinite number of ways in which the structure can be expressed. Take an analogy with arithmetic: we may speak of a set of numbers between one and five, and although we have created a boundary, there exist infinite possibilities in the form of fractions between 1 and 5. There are infinite numerical expressions of 1-5, just as there are an infinite variety of materialities for consumerism. Therefore, because there are infinite sorts of consumerism, we cannot rule the possibility of happiness out of everyone of them, if just because we may be missing the sort in which every last individual is satisfied with their consumption.

Even if many people are unhappy in our consumerist society, this only means that we are going about consumerism in the wrong way, not that there is something wrong with consumerism in general.

I reject this conclusion in two ways: One, because to the extent that it may be used as a non-trivial, reassuring principle it becomes self-contradictory; two, because an anti-essentialist approach of this sort a fundamentally wrong approach for any attempt at a non-trivial assessment of reality. Our anti-essentialist reassures us that capitalism is unproblematic, because if we try hard enough we can discover that far corner of its infinite potential where kindness and fraternity bind us gladly to a more responsible and contented entrepreneurialism; we have no need of an alternate system to foster generosity, because generosity is available to us within the current one, with some modifications. This defense of consumerism, however, ignores a key conceptual element of anti-essentialist — that things have no essence on their own, but gain their significance from the whole of their surroundings? Anyone who holds the view that there are no essential characteristics binding phenomena together restricts himself from the possibility of positing generosity in (for instance) socialism or capitalism, in as much as there is no such thing as “generosity” in either. There must be generosity-in-capitalism and generosity-in-socialism, each made unique by its position in the web of phenomena. The reassurance provided by the possibility of generosity-in-capitalism is therefore questionable, since there may be a different one in socialism, which if not “objectively better or worse” could be superior or inferior in a aesthetico-moral sense.<sup>48</sup>

The other problem with this theoretical defense of capitalism from the charge that it

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<sup>48</sup> I.e. Better in the sense that we appreciate it more for some reason, but not better in some abstract sense.

corrupts those entangled in it is that the theory is based on a simply false understanding of reality — one which almost paradoxically deifies in the universal only to deny its relevance. The anti-essentialist doctrine, or at least the particular formulation of it with which I am concerned, thinks of structure as something beyond, over and above, experience which causes phenomena to be produced in a certain way. The relationship, however, is not casual; just as symbol is not something over and above our world, essence — or structure — is bound up with its content. As I have argued in (II.1), structure and form are the officiation into existence of what is already there. Of course essence becomes trivial and vacuous when it is abstracted from matter, but without essence matter becomes no thing, and in as much as it ceases (in this abstractum) to be a thing it is nothing.

Now let us consider that matter is a finite sort of thing. Everything that exists is finite, for in being this-and-not-that it accepts both distinctions from, and links, to all the other this-not-thats. Consider further that matter appears in certain configurations, and not others, in certain regions of existence. Not only this, for ever “level” of complexity there is a finite number of configurations, because existence contains a limited number building blocks (I.e. a certain number of elements, a certain number of ways in which each can appear in configuration with the other). It is true that considerable nuance and multiplicity becomes possible as more building blocks are configured, but this does not mean that there are an infinite number. The anti-essentialist may respond at this point that I have argued in a circular fashion, because I have presupposed the essential relationship between two atoms of the same type;<sup>49</sup> they are in fact different sorts of things by virtue of their indexical relationship to time and space. This, however,

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<sup>49</sup> I am aware that not every uranium atom is the same as every other uranium atom; this difference is the source of radiation. My point is that some atoms do in fact have the same characteristics as others; when I write “two atoms of the same type” let this be shorthand for “two particles with an identical set of potential causal relationships.”

is problematic for the anti-essentialist in that he wishes to free us from confining abstractions, but what could be more abstract than “an indexical relationship to time and space” and simultaneous denial of the physical characteristics (or causal powers) of an object? In fact, an appeal to indexical relationships is itself essentializing because it requires us to describe something as at this-and-not-that point in space. The absence of universals, essentialized categories, collapses the whole universe into a single point, for in a world of infinite multiplicity all things slur together into a perfect unity; everything is the same thing, which not only gives rise to a contradiction,<sup>50</sup> but has a particularly essentialized sound to it.

Structure is not opposed to content at all, but embodied in it. The essence of a kind of object is identical with what an object of that kind is, does or can do by virtue of what it is. Returning to the question of consumerism and happiness, we may say then that such an optimistic outlook for the relationship of humanity to capitalism is ill-founded. This is not to say, at this point, that such an outlook — that it is possible for humanity to flourish in consumerism — is incorrect, only that one particular set of arguments for it has failed. In fact, I am not terribly concerned here with generosity in capitalism as much as I have been with its use as an example of the way in which anti-essentialism breaks down into incoherence. What I *have* shown so far is that it is by no means “nonsense” to speak of the essence of a thing. It may be that the more complex that thing is, the more embodiments its essence may be and that we can create sub-essences (e.g. *porcupine on a rock* and *porcupine in a log*), but it does not follow from this that there are no essences; it just means there are more of them.

Now, if certain content is the embodiment of certain structure, then certain (and a limited

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<sup>50</sup> From within the world of the perfect unity-multiplicity there is no contradiction. There is no particular viewpoint from which there could be one, but from our world — the one in which we are obligated to reside — the position contradicts itself in this light.

set of configurations of) matter must be responsible for the genesis of the conceptual being; certain cognitive structures require certain matter. What I suggest is that a side effect of this will be certain content in association with that structure, if just because the matter of any brain giving rise to the conceptual being will provide cognitive content as it provides structure, since one cannot exist without the other. There will, therefore, be shared cognitive content across conceptual beings. It is not, then, nonsensical for me to posit that every conceptual-being would have an anxious reaction to the realization of its own neurosis, that it is simply hardwired into our brains to be off-put when we are forced to ask ourselves “Why should this really be important to me?” That said, it remains up to empirical researchers to determine whether this particular reaction is one of the items of content hardwired into the structure of conceptual thought.

### 3- Concluding Remarks in the Form of a Verb Brief & More Modest Solution

The (hypothetical) use-value of this project may be more significant to its legitimacy than its universal truth. Let us assume, at this point, that my entire argument above is incorrect, that not only is it incorrect, but nonsensical, to identify a particular reaction by humans to a social system as essential to the conceptual-being. That a reaction is not *a priori* essential to conceptual-beings, does not preclude a great many of them from having that reaction. On the one hand, it may be that most individuals are entirely content with modern life; on the other, they may be quite unhappy, and the reasons outlined above may be the genuine reasons for that unhappiness. Seeing as I, like most writers, are not acquainted with most people, I could not possibly know whether this is the case. What a writing of this sort accomplishes then, if exposed to the public, is both to test its own practical truth (i.e. *Are people, in fact, happy or unhappy?*),

and if there is truth to its claims, to have sufficiently explained those claims such that a response can be made to the problem which has been identified. If it does resonate with a public, then perhaps something will be done; perhaps something of value has been accomplished. If it does not, then I have mistaken a particular prejudice of mine for an insightful one, and must work to rid myself of it as much as is possible in order to ascertain something closer to a truth. In the end, though, we are all trapped to some degree by our prejudices, our thoughts officiate themselves half-unbidden in the mind, and we can only propound what we believe.

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