



CHAPTER 3

Perverse America

Abstract This chapter explores various examples of “American Wisdom.” American wisdom is a fragmented structure of discourse which currently prevails within American society. On social media, printed on bubble gum wrappings, on the sleeves of coffee cups, and so on, there are symbolic inscriptions which are meant to retroactively alleviate the real trauma of subjective destitution. Lacanian clinicians have also noted that this is the discursive structure of addictions. Addiction is not only epidemic within America, but it is probably what is most American about America. Within America, the universal prohibition of the father has been replaced with the particular affirmative declarations of the maternal superegoic voice.

Keywords Postmodernism · American aesthetics · American culture · Lacanian psychoanalysis · Perversion · Psychosis · Capitalist discourse

AMERICAN WISDOM

Consider the popular American television drama *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–2018). The medical drama (including all of its props, setting, narrative, roles, and so on) serves as a pretence to both conceal and reveal fundamental traumatic questions concerning sexuality and death. I have argued elsewhere that all discourses are reducible to key questions

concerning sexuality and death, such as “what does it mean to be a woman?,” “am I alive or am I dead?,” or “can I master death?” (see Rousselle 2013). Indeed, difficult questions concerning either sexuality or death (or both) are most often discovered in cases of hysterical or obsessional neurosis. These unanswerable questions seem to pose the most enduring challenge to our mental well-being and therefore disrupt the consistency of our everyday life. These questions are “real” in the Lacanian sense: they shatter the symbolic coordinates of our everyday lives, they disrupt its imaginary consistency, introducing an essential impasse, an obstacle, a rupture.

These are the questions that are rendered most palpable and witnessed as entirely unavoidable within *Grey’s Anatomy*. Each episode reaches a fever pitch at the precise moment that a fundamental question concerning sexuality or mortality becomes no longer containable within the medical pretence. This is most often indicated by an intensification in background music. Consequently, the medical pretence momentarily dissolves as the music comes to an abrupt and dramatic halt. It is at this crucial moment that the subject of the film traumatically, though fleetingly, encounters truth: the subject is revealed in his or her destitution, incapable of finding a solution to the problem. Suddenly, a calm reassuring female voice speaks from somewhere outside of the frame—as if from another scene—to provide us all with an essential life lesson.

We should pay close attention to these little life lessons because they reveal to us something essential about life in America. Each lesson functions as a little piece of wisdom meant to retroactively offer a remedy, however provisional, for subjective destitution. We are treated to such life lessons as: “sometimes the expected simply pales in comparison to the unexpected,” “sometimes it is good to be scared, it means you still have something to lose,” “sometimes the future changes quickly and completely and we’re left with only the choice of what to do next,” and so on. These life lessons introduce the triumph of the imaginary against the trauma of the real. Within the shit-storm of the plot, there is, finally, some calm, quiet, reassurance.

Grey’s Anatomy demonstrates how capitalist discourse functions today, and, moreover how Meredith Grey, a female doctor, can come to embody the most essential anatomy, the maternal phallus: the paternal signifier, that is, the “name-of-the-father,” would have instigated a universal prohibition against enjoyment (e.g., “you shall not ...”), and this would have, as a consequence, instigated a desire to return to

the supposed lost enjoyment. That was the classical Freudian model. The master discourse of capitalism—Lacan claimed that it was the “new” master discourse during his 1972 seminars—substitutes the universal paternal symbolic prohibition for a maternal cinematic superegoic voice. The latter speaks to the subject through the a particular affirmative logic. It is a shift from the *universal prohibition of enjoyment* to a *particular affirmative injunction to enjoy*. Moreover, it is a shift from the statement “you shall not ...” to “sometimes you should ...” (or “maybe it is okay that ...”). Slavoj Žižek (1999) argues that it is a shift from the symbolic prohibition of enjoyment towards an imaginary imperative to enjoy.

Slavoj Žižek asks: “does the capitalist injunction to enjoy effectively aim at soliciting *jouissance* in its excessive character, or are we ultimately rather dealing with a kind of universalized pleasure-principle, with a life dedicated to pleasures?” He continues, “[i]n other words, are the injunctions to have a good time, to acquire self-realization and self-fulfillment, etc., not precisely injunctions to AVOID the excessive *jouissance*, to find a kind of homeostatic balance?” (Žižek 2007). American personal wisdoms, which are littered across department stores, casually printed onto bubble gum and cough drop wrappings, printed in exotic form onto coffee sleeves, and so on, all indicate to us that there is an attempt to avoid the excessive *jouissance* which intrudes into and indeed eclipses the social bond. Without *the* name-of-the-father, there are only imaginary *names of the father* which are inadequate substitutes that paradoxically produce the subject’s spiral into further suffering at the level of *jouissance*.

Similar personal wisdoms and life lessons are littered across the social media walls of our friends, colleagues, and family. The truth is revealed here in a peculiar form: symbolic inscriptions are often transformed in real-time into rectangular images. It seems to me that this demonstrates a new perspective on what Fredric Jameson famously described as the “new depthlessness” within American society (Jameson 1991: 6, 9). Jameson named this the American aesthetic of “postmodernism” and compared the diamond dust shoes of Andy Warhol to the peasant shoes of Vincent Van Gogh. It seems to me that psychoanalytic theory helps to develop these insights in an exciting new direction by demonstrating that postmodernism is not simply an aesthetic or ideology but more fundamentally a discourse, which means, even more precisely, that it is a peculiar solution to the problem of sexuality or death within the capitalist and pragmatic form of social bond.

On social media today, and this is particularly the case on Facebook, user's inputted text—once capable of being copied, pasted, and therefore internally manipulated (because it retained the font in its “symbolic” dimension)—today becomes flattened by the image, reducing or ironing out its inherent symbolic depth. For example, “I am having fun!” can be written on Facebook and instantly transformed into a large rectangular image with a rainbow background. This possibility is not exclusive to Facebook. Other users of various social media platforms are encouraged to curate large collections of personal wisdoms (see Anon 2018a, b; also see the example below from Pinterest). For example, some popular Instagram users produce and curate vast collections of their own personal wisdoms, in image form, and then post them onto their digital wall. Incidentally, each image tends to be signed by the artist, as if it were a beautiful portrait. Indeed, the personal wisdom may be today's American self-portrait. It is as if one is signing a delicate piece of art. The artist seems to recognize that it is through one's art that one makes a name for oneself, and, precisely, it is through the art as a prop that one erects a social link. In every case: the ostensibly symbolic wisdom becomes transmitted and consumed as a work of beauty, a work of art.

This discursive operation is accelerated and revealed in a most blatant way by the well regarded American artist Mark Lombardi. Lombardi's art functions through a strange conflation of image/body and signifier/word. Perhaps it also works in the opposite direction: not only from signifier/word to image/body, but also from image/body to signifier/word. Here, I much prefer the concept of *Semblant* introduced by Jacques Lacan in his later teaching. Russell Grigg explains that the *Semblant* “is an object of enjoyment that is both seductive and deceptive. The subject both believes and doesn't believe in *semblants* but in any case opts for them over the real thing because paradoxically they are a source of satisfaction [...] the *semblant* fills a lack” (Grigg 2007). I maintain that perverse American wisdom functions through the *semblant*—which, as Grigg explains, also implies that it functions through a sort of disavowal of the real of castration—so as to avoid the traumatic engagement with the real. Moreover, this helps to explain why Lacan claimed obscurely that “The signifier is the *semblant* part excellence!” (Lacan 1971). The *semblant* occurs somewhere in the juncture of imaginary and symbolic, as a perverse solution to the traumatic destitution of castration, of the real. The consequence, as Alain Badiou has put forward in his discussions of the work of Lombardi: “[there is a] substitution of names and bodies [...] we have no picture except for the name” (Badiou 1999).

In one case Lombardi mapped the symbolic network of signifiers linking George W. Bush to Osama Bin Laden. The result was a stunning pictorial map which resembles the geometric properties of a sphere. The imaginary surges forth to function in place of the symbolic, because of a hole in the symbolic itself, and, moreover, because that hole produces, by consequence, an inability to separate from the real: or, rather, the imaginary postures as symbolic axiom.

There are numerous examples of the discourse of American “personal wisdom” that we might point to from American aesthetic culture. These are wisdoms written on the wrappings, or casings, of various commodities (rather than, for example, the kinder surprise egg—which was banned for a long time within America for being dangerous—which includes a little special object inside of it). The move, I maintain, demonstrates also a transition from an “intensional” culture to an “extensional” culture. If the kinder surprise egg had within itself a surprise object to fill the void of its contents, then, American wisdoms are printed on the outside of an object precisely to render that object consistent.

Today’s Coca-Cola bottle is a remarkable example of this shift of logic. Slavoj Žižek once taught that Coca-Cola was an exemplary ideological object that concerned “the injunction to enjoy.” You *must* enjoy Coca-Cola, and this is elevated into an ideological imperative within capitalism. However, we should go a bit further here: Coca-Cola, exemplary of capitalist discourse, is meant to be shared, as are all commodities. Coca-Cola is best when it is shared, and this has always been one of its central advertising slogans. The bottle of Coca-Cola brings together the family of polar bears for the holiday, so that its function is to establish a social bond, however tenuous.

Such is the latest marketing campaign from Coca-Cola: on each bottle there is a list of proper names: significant people are named, like “Father,” “Mother,” “Soul-mate,” and so on. But there are also more obvious proper names printed onto the bottle such as “Jason,” “Sara,” and so on. And, finally, various social groups are printed onto the bottles: “Family,” “Colleagues,” and so on. The most recent addition was to make these stickers that can be removed and placed onto other objects. The point is that there is always another commodity, another Coca-Cola bottle, which may be purchased so as to quickly repair the rupture in the social link. No wonder Francis Fukuyama once claimed that liberal democratic capitalism was the “end of history,” and Fredric Jameson claimed that we cannot imagine the end of capitalism: this is the *only* solution on the table to

handle the problem of castration. The same point may be made here for cough drops (which, within American, have for a long time included little words of wisdom printed onto each individually wrapped piece) or bubble gum, coffee sleeves, and so on. Thus, there is something a bit more to the writing of names on Starbucks coffee cups than merely satisfying a business requirement for efficiency: we *want* our names on our cups, and we want others to see the names that are on our cups.

Word art, a growing trend within the aesthetics of the American household, has its historical equivalent in the Kitsch knick-knacks which once expressed the simple aphorism that “home is where the heart is.” The new American kitsch can be found in the home decor section of any American furniture or retail outlet: “Love every moment, Laugh every day, Live beyond words,” “Never stop dreaming,” “Smiles, Laughter, and Sometimes Tears,” and so on (Wal-Mart 2018). Similar word art pieces may be found at popular book selling franchises. Indeed, the major book chains now dedicate entire shelves to texts whose pages are filled with poems such as the popular ones written by Rupi Kaur. Poetry must now express itself as personal wisdom, and, moreover, it must include a rudimentary sketch or drawing alongside—indeed, within or alongside—the text itself. In every case, we are witnessing the desperate attempt towards the affirmative particular maternal voice.

In *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993), the popular American sociologist George Ritzer famously claimed that sociologists should understand the rationalization processes of McDonalds’ Restaurants if they wish to know anything at all about Western modernization. Ritzer is continuing the project set out by the German sociologist Max Weber in attempting to explore and understand the ideal-typical manifestations of instrumental rational social action in the West. Ritzer’s project is to think about these instrumental rational types within the context of incessant globalizing tendencies. Ritzer is therefore supplementing or extending the classic work of Max Weber on modernization, rationalization, and social action.

Ritzer is correct in his assertion that McDonalds has become synonymous with American ideology. Indeed, Weber’s ideal-typical bureaucratic structure is perhaps best rendered in Ritzer’s ideal-typical McDonalds’ restaurant. McDonald’s restaurants do not therefore only export American food or products, they export, precisely in the structure and function of its internal organization, American ideology. However, we might now look more closely at their aesthetic practices to deepen our

analyses: McDonalds' restaurants have begun to incorporate personal wisdoms into their architecture, onto their products (chicken McNugget boxes, fountain soda cups, etc.). At one popular location on the corner of Spadina Avenue and Queen Street in Toronto, Canada, perhaps the most frequented franchise in all of Canada, there is an entire wall dedicated to the dissemination of such wisdom: "Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard," "Life is like a camera, focus on what's important," etc. Fast food, then, with fast ideology; capitalist discourse is nothing but speed—until it burns itself out, until the heart attack.

American wisdom works precisely because it keeps moving. When one piece of wisdom loses its lustre another one is already prepared in advance to replace it, to be purchased, ornamented, and posted on whim as a cheap substitute. Its purpose is always to establish a symbolic moral order that is missing, and yet it can only ever do so in short order. The American too much enjoys the sound of the maternal voice, *lalangue*, as Lacan named it: the popular American app for ordering fast food on one's phone, "tapingo," represents the meaning of "tap and go," and yet, everyday the American enjoys its sound over its meaning: "tah-pang-oh." Žižek, in quite another context, commenting upon the problem of wisdom, voiced the following:

Whatever you do a wise male [sic] will come and justify it. Like, you do something risky and you succeed, there will be a wise man who will come and say something like [...] "only those who risk profit." Lets say you do the same thing and fail, a wise man will come and say "you can not urinate against the wind." This is wisdom, whatever you do a wise guy will come and justify it. (Žižek 2014)

American wisdom does not challenge the ego. It does not disrupt the sense of self. Instead it desires to construct for itself a stable sense of self: Charles Horton Cooley's theory of the "looking-glass self" aims to demonstrate the constitution of subjectivity as such, and not, as it were, the *negation* or *split* of subjectivity. The Lacanian intervention is to demonstrate that the subject is there in the split that occurs after the judgement—and not in the consequent self image that pops out at the end of the chain. American wisdom retroactively affirms the particular circumstance of the subject, in image form. And it provides its solution always faster and faster. American wisdom keeps moving, faster and faster.

And sometimes it burns itself out.

PERVERSE DISCOURSE AND CAPITALISM

For Lacan, “the capitalist discourse [...] works like clockwork, it cannot work better, but it works too fast, it consumes until it [itself] burns out” (Lacan 1972; my translation). Lacan claimed in his seventeenth seminar that the capitalist marketplace becomes increasingly populated by false objects of desire named “lathouses.” Lacan put it in the following way: “[lathouses are] tiny objects that you will encounter when you leave, on the footpath at the corner of every street, behind every window, in the abundance of these objects designed to be the cause of your desire” (Lacan [1969] 2007: 163). Pierre-Gilles Gueguen (2018) went a bit further and claimed that these little objects exist especially within the entertainment market, fabricated as objects of the entertainment industry. Lathouses circulate within a market to fascinate consumers, to captivate them, indeed to capture their eyes. Moreover, they endure only so as to sustain our interest for a short period of time. We see an example of their essential function outlined by none other than Jerry Seinfeld in his award acceptance speech from the 55th annual “Clio” awards:

In advertising, everything is the way you wish it was. [...] I just want to enjoy the commercial. I want to get the thing. I know the product is going to stink, I know that. Because we live in the world, and we know that everything stinks. We all believe that maybe this one won’t stink. [...] But we are happy in that moment between the commercial and the purchase. (Seinfeld 2018)

Seinfeld here describes with clarity the discursive function of the lathouse within advertising, entertainment, or marketing. I want to advance still further by suggesting that these are primarily *aesthetic*—that is, imaginary—objects which are fabricated by industry to “stand in” for the cause of the subject’s desire.

Tom Svoulos wrote that the lathouses “serve as a stand-in, ready-made object, to take the place of the *objet a* for the subject” (Svoulos 2017: 136). Alternatively, they might be understood as “object-props,” that is, as dispensable master signifiers (S1s) that constantly slide around within the circuit of various market substitutions. The lathouse is locked into the circuit of the market and yet absolutely dispensable: the subject can easily do away with the lathouse so long as another one is prepared in advance to take its place. The subject exists here torn not between signifiers but rather between commodities, and this produces certain new tensions for

the subject (see Samo Tomsic’s rigorous study of Capitalism & Lacanian psychoanalysis, 2015).

Imaginary names function as props, as substitutes, doomed to be replaced yet again as the subject moves quickly and surely towards the “next big thing.” For some time there was even a popular website titled “The Next Big Thing” which archived short “trending” videos for viewers pleasure. Thus, \$, within the formula of capitalist discourse, is meant to represent a fundamental antagonism or rupture for the subject within the social bond. Within any discourse, there is always an impossibility or obstacle to the social link. This is often indicated within Lacan’s diagrams by a triangle or double slashes. For example, in the discourse of the university, there is an obstacle in the relation of the master signifier as truth of the discourse and the split subject as the product of the discourse (Fig. 3.1).

However, within capitalist discourse, the non-relation disappears—this is why, perhaps, it must be produced, or, in other words, why the subject often invents solutions that are paradoxically obstacles to his enjoyment. Tomsic writes that the vectors of the capitalist discourse demonstrate that it is grounded “on the foreclosure of the impossibility of totalization that marks [the] other discourses, an impossibility that is structurally determined by the fact that the signifiers constitute an open system of differences” (2015: 220). This is why the sexual non-rapport—or, rather, *sex as such*—is such a problem within capitalist discourse. The antagonism is revealed to the subject very often through the unbearable intrusion of a question concerning sexuality or death. And capitalism serves precisely to obscure the centrality of these questions. Lacan said: “capitalism, [has as its] starting point [...] getting rid of sex” (Lacan 1990: 30).

Fig. 3.1 Jacques
Lacan’s discourse of the
university

<u>Agent</u>	→	<u>Other</u>
Truth	//	Product

$\frac{S^2}{S^1}$	→	$\frac{a}{\$}$
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Fig. 3.2 Jacques Lacan's capitalist discourse

Lacan's formula for capitalist discourse appears in Fig. 3.2.

The obstacle of sexual non-rapport has been overcome in capitalist discourse only to produce an even worse problem for the subject: the endless circulation of master semblants, lathouses, designed to provide an obstacle to the intrusion of enjoyment even while providing the subject with further enjoyment. Levi Bryant has read capitalist discourse in the following way:

'You must find ever more exotic and different forms of enjoyment!' However, we'll note that in the position of the product of this discourse we now see *objet a*, or the remainder. In the "Milan Discourse" Lacan claims that the discourse of the capitalist is the most ingenious discourse to date in that it creates something like an "eternal motion machine." For each commodity (S2) the divided subject (\$) consumes, he experiences a disappointment ("this is not it!"). He is thus compelled to pursue yet another commodity to fulfill the super-egoic imperative. And so it goes on continuously: nothing is ever enough because no commodity is ever "it". (Bryant 2013)

This explains very well why cell phones have become the ultimate American commodity. The latest cell phones perform the function of discourse stabilization by temporarily mending the social link. If the previous discourses aimed at fixing a rupture in the social link, we might claim that capitalist discourse aims rather at *creating the very possibility of a social link*. Each gadget may be replaced suddenly for the next big thing (the next iPhone model, the next software upgrade, and so on), yet each nonetheless serves the function of interfacing with an Other, or, rather, of constructing this Other in the first place.

Take, for example, the current popularity of "Light Phone." This cutting edge American commodity—its headquarters is in California—is sold at double the price of the many cell phones and yet it performs only two features: text messaging and calls. The Light Phone prohibits users from enjoying social media and other related functions (see Light Phone 2018). Indeed, this is its selling point. Its message: "you shall not

enjoy all of the features of your regular smart phone!” In other words, the phone is meant to ease burn out and to prohibit enjoyment: “The Light Phone is your phone away from phone. It’s a casual, secondary phone that encourages you to leave behind your smartphone [...] Our original Light Phone is intentionally limited to phone calls and nine speed dials.” Does this not imply that the Light Phone is one of capitalism’s latest and most innovative solutions to the problem at the heart of its own discourse, burn-out? What the subject is purchasing is a father. Indeed, the father has become a commodity that can be bought and sold on the market. The Light Phone installs a new circuit into capitalist discourse which allows it to continue to function *even after it has burned out*.

I propose to amend the aforementioned formula to draw out some inevitable consequences: $\$ \rightarrow S1 \rightarrow \$$. Within capitalist discourse there is always a return to the starting point: primordial subjective division, $\$$. There is always a return to the question of sexuality and death. The circuit always begins anew. In this case, capitalist discourse compels the subject to enjoy, but then, when the subject feels that this enjoyment is too much, she turns, finally, towards some prohibition, and this prohibition is also integrated into market mechanisms. Not only is the “too much” of enjoyment transmitted through market mechanisms, but, it is also transmitted through the gadgets and apps of daily life in America. Tinder is but one notable example. Many further examples abound: for example, at a Conference in California among the tenured class of America’s Ivy League professors, I witnessed numerous sessions dedicated to instructing professors on how to keep enjoyment at bay. Workshops concerned themes of how to minimize distractions so as to complete major research papers. During one such session, numerous academics shared their “app preferences” for temporarily silencing social media. It was here that I discovered the apps “Freedom” and “Self-Control:” apps designed precisely to block out, for a limited time, social media, and other computer programs, so that its users can just get some work finished.

When I first moved to America I visited a family owned furniture store to purchase a new mattress. To my surprise, the gentleman who owned the shop immediately guessed the precise type and size of mattress that I required. How could he have known? He told me that he learned to ascertain appropriate mattress sizes according to a simple demographic marker: age. For example, young adults prefer to buy smaller mattress sizes (twin, small double/full size mattresses). On the one hand, these

mattresses are more affordable than the luxury sized mattresses. On the other hand, he reasoned that there must be an unconscious motivation involved in this trend: after so many years of relative confinement within the parents' home these individuals are now out in the world for the first time. They desire smaller mattress sizes, then, because this forces intimacy among partners. In a word, young adults desire smaller sized mattresses because they want to bring into existence a sexual relationship. At least, this is the classical Freudian formulation of the problem.

The gentleman continued: middle-aged couples tend to desire larger mattresses. Menopause significantly disrupts the sexual life of the couple, and so, during this time, the couple opts for comfort and for more room between bodies. What they desire is to put the sexual relationship at a distance. Finally, the elderly prefer smaller, single- or twin-sized mattresses in order to accommodate their new circumstances: the sexual or romantic partner has either moved into their own bed or else has passed away. The bed should be structured so as to permit the body to easily roll off before standing up to face the day.

Although I was impressed by this little narrative I nonetheless found fault with it. The claim that young adults desire smaller mattresses did not match with my understanding of capitalist dynamics, where sex sells, where sexuality functions as if one's sexual object choice was a commodity on a supermarket shelf. As it happens, young adults are purchasing larger—queen or king size, even “California King Size”—mattresses (Suckling 2016). The larger mattress is meant to put some distance or some rest to the “too-muchness” of contemporary sexuality. Everyday life involves too much stimulation, there are too many connections, too much information, too many options for intimacy, and so on.

Lacanian clinicians have noted that this is also the discursive structure found among those who suffer from addictions. Increasingly, clinicians are referring to cases of “sex addiction.” There are proposals for clinical studies of “hypersexuality,” and there is a question of the relationship of sexual addictions to drug addictions (see PsychologyToday 2018). Addiction is not only an epidemic within America, it is probably what is most American about America. Žižek wrote that “the norm in contemporary permissive-hedonist capitalism [is to] surrender to unconstrained consumption whose exemplary cases are drug addiction and alcoholism” (Žižek 2017). These are discourses of enjoyment, or, to use the Lacanian concept, they are discourses of *jouissance*, which explain why in capitalist discourse it is *objet petit a* that is ultimately produced (because the *objet petit a* is the object cause of our desire).

Similarly, American social media is often understood as a perverse addiction because it encourages the perpetuation of a type of social link founded upon the eternal return of despair. As a demonstration of this see the popular British television series *Black Mirror* (2011–2017). In Season 3, Episode 1, titled “Nosedive,” there is a woman who continuously posts images of herself onto various social media channels in order to solicit favourable ratings as a result of these interactions (here, again, we see the imaginary soliciting a symbolic tether). Eventually, she burns herself out from trying endlessly to “fit in” to the social bond. Paradoxically, she found liberation at the end of the episode, but only from within the bars of a prison cell. Inside the four walls of the prison, she found herself permitted to experience her subjective destitution and to make use of it as the rudimentary element for the construction of an entirely novel social link. This time it is a social link founded upon destitution, upon the disruption of the social link itself: What the fuck are you looking at? Just what I was wondering.

Well Don't! Don't? Don't wonder? Uh-huh.

It would be a dull world without wonder.

I don't give a shit about your world.

I don't like your brassiere.

I don't like your moustache.

I don't like your aura.

- My aura? - Yeah.

I don't like your head.

Your entire head is just ridiculous to me.

Really? You look like an alcoholic former weatherman.

You sound like a lost little lamb that just got told there's
no Santa Claus.

What sort of cartoon character did your mum have to fuck to brew
you up in the womb? At least I look like I was born, not shit out by
some tormented cow creature in an underground lab.

You got tossed out of that lab.

- Oh, yeah? - Oh, yeah, flushed out.

- Ooh! - In the trash! - Your face is a fucking - Fucking.

Fucking biological car crash that made Picasso screw his eyes up and
say, “Well, that just don't make sense.”

[laughs] - You're a fucking asshole.

- Fuck you! - Fuck you next Wednesday.

- Fuck you for Christmas! - Fuck you! - Fuck you!

[end]

One cannot help but compare this to Plato's infamous allegory of the cave. I shall provide a summary of the allegory from Wikipedia:

Plato has Socrates describe a gathering of people who have lived chained to the wall of a cave all of their lives, facing a blank wall. These people watch shadows projected on the wall from things passing in front of a fire behind them, and they begin to give names to these shadows. The shadows are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality. He then explains how the philosopher is like a prisoner who is freed from the cave and comes to understand that the shadows on the wall do not make up reality at all, for he can perceive the true form of reality rather than the mere shadows seen by the prisoners.

This allegory positions the philosopher as the enlightened individual, free from confinement, free from the prison cell. I would like to provide a counterpoint to this allegory. There is a similar allegory from the Quran—Surah 18, *al-Kahf*, translated into English as “The Cave”—also found in the Christian Bible, which tells of seven individuals who abandoned the jousissance of the pagan city to pursue their more dogmatic religious convictions. They take refuge in a cave, and bring a dog along with them to guard its entrance. What we find in this case is quite the opposite from the philosopher's cave: liberation, in this latter case, is found not by moving *outside* of the cave, but rather by moving *inside* of the cave. Indeed, the Quran indicates that the sleepers were most awake precisely when they entered the cave and fell asleep: in the Quran it was written that “you would have thought them awake, while they were asleep.”

There have been many variations of Plato's allegory of the cave. For example, McKenzie Wark once amended the allegory by claiming that when the individual leaves the cave he finds himself inside yet another cave, and so on (see Wark 2018). This would imply that there are caves all the way, or, to provide a nice Lacanian twist, it implies that the cave is structured like a Klein bottle so that they only way “outside” of the cave is to move further “inside” and the only way “inside” the cave is to move “outside” of it. This is how I read Louis Althusser's popular claim that the only way “outside” of ideology is to move “inside” of it, and that those who claim to be “outside” of ideology are by definition inside of it (Althusser 1968). In Plato's version we are expected to believe that the people inside the cave are imprisoned by ideology and that there is a place of pure freedom located somewhere outside of the

cave. This place of freedom has been criticized by many contemporary theorists, since, for them, there is “no uncontaminated point of departure” outside of power or social structure (Newman 2001). We therefore need within radical theory an alternative to this “uncontaminated point of departure.”

The Quranic version begins already within the space of freedom, already within a space of permissive enjoyment: we are confronted with the traumatic freedom of belief, that is, the freedom to worship false idols, images of god, and so on. It is from within this terrifying space of freedom that the “woke” flee into the cave of ideology and go to sleep. What the Quran narrates, then, is the possibility of a flight from *jouissance* whereby our dreams are literally turned against the terrible freedoms of the real. The lesson is instructive: if the so-called Western Platonic vision is one of achieving absolute freedom from the prison of ideology—it is a desire to move beyond the prohibition of enjoyment—then the Islamic vision is one of burrowing within ideology in order to escape the traumatizing abyss of absolute *jouissance*.

I want to return to the question I asked previously: why does the circuit of American wisdom continue to repeat itself if it nonetheless produces the same devastation for the subject? Lacan claimed that the clinical structure of perversion remains suspended within a moment of indecision vis-a-vis the name-of-the-father as master signifier. The subjective operation is one of disavowal: “I know very well, but ...” For example, who among us does not already *know very well* that Facebook cashes in on our addiction? Despite this knowledge, many of us continue to use Facebook as a social link (for more on this see Jodi Dean’s fascinating *Blog Theory*, 2010). In other words, Facebook functions through the logic of disavowal: the subject knows very well that subjective destitution is the natural consequence of becoming captured within Facebook’s circuitry of posts and clicks, but the subject refuses to change the consequent practice of acting as if this knowledge mattered. There is a separation of practice and knowledge, of acting and knowing. This separation poses considerable problems for clinicians who intend to treat perverse addiction. Yet, we are in an even worse situation because perversion has itself been disavowed as a clinical structure (e.g., the analyst now proclaims: “I know very well that perversion still exists, but I act as if it does not exist within my clinical practice”). As Rik Loose has put it: “[...] the [perverse] subject sometimes acknowledges the lack [of subjective destitution] and at other times refuses this [knowledge]” (2002: 276; also see Benvenuto 2016).

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