

CHOICE AND THE ULTIMATE INCURABLE

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In Western capitalist society everything in people's lives appears to be a matter of choice. One can choose one's identity, sexual orientation, religion, to have or not have children. One is free to remodel one's body, even change gender, and one hopes to have some power over the ultimate incurable in one's life—when and how to die. Foucault's vision from his last works on the history of sexuality was to make out of ourselves a work of art. Today it appears as though this proposition has been fully embraced by the dominant ideology.

We are constantly reminded, by the advertisements that surround us, that we can make our lives into whatever we wish. A famous maker of women's underwear advertises a new collection with the question: "What women do you want to be today?" A travel company urges customers with the slogan: "Life—book now!" A university addresses future students with the phrase: "Become what you want to be!" A fashion designer pacifies the guilty feelings of consumers with the exclamation: "I am worth it!" Even little children are seduced with this kind of messages: "I am something special" is the title of one series of children's books. In times of commodity fetishism the child is constantly encouraged to develop his or her uniqueness, clearly showing that there is an increasing danger to fall into the phantasmagoria of sameness.¹ The media tells us to become architects of the most important project—our own life; designers of the most valuable asset—our own body; and managers of the most important enterprise—our creative faculties.

It is interesting to juxtapose being an artist of one's own life and having limitless choices in designing one's existence with the fact that many artists are unable *not* to do what they are doing. Quite often, when an artist is asked why he or she is expressing him- or herself in a particular way, the answer is: "I just had to do it." Such creative urges, pushing the artist in a particular direction, seem beyond rational choice.

The American artist Stephen Shanabrook, for example, seems to be one such person. His work very much circulates around death and medicine, while even adding chocolates to the mix. Shanabrook became well known for making special kinds of chocolate pralines by molding chocolate on the wounds of dead bodies he had found in Russian and American morgues. When I asked Shanabrook why he combined chocolates and dead bodies, he quickly offered a theory of what happened in his childhood: his father

was a doctor, and starting from a young age, Shanabrook has been fascinated by envisioning his performing surgery and autopsies. Equally memorable, however, was his childhood experience in relation to chocolates. Day after day, as a young child, Shanabrook passed the chocolate factory on his way to school and became mesmerized by the smell hanging over it. In his teenage years, Shanabrook started spending all his afternoons helping out in the factory so that he was able to enjoy this smell even further.

When explaining his artwork, Shanabrook likes to point out that chocolate melts at the human body's average temperature. By molding chocolates on the wounds of corpses, Shanabrook tries to supplement the horrific image of wounds with the seductive smell of chocolate. From the responses he typically receives from the public, the more people observe the pralines, the more they forget about the fact that they are molded on corpses while giving in to the enjoyment of the smell.

One could draw several psychoanalytic conclusions as to why Shanabrook's work appears beyond rational choice. In his work he cannot stop reflecting on death, medicine, and chocolates. One can guess that the smell of chocolates is, in a particular way, linked to partial drives—the pockets of enjoyment for the subject. One could also speculate, however, on whether Shanabrook had a traumatic relationship with his father: does he take his father as a castration figure who prevents him from access to enjoyment (that is, does his father extract life from his body)? Does Shanabrook have an overwhelming anxiety over death and attempt to deal with this by covering the horror of death with the seductive smell of chocolates? Or is he actually fascinated by death and simply coupling this fascination with the enjoyment that he gets from the smell of chocolates? No matter which direction we might take in our interpretation, we will still have a problem fully explaining why artists like Shanabrook endlessly circulate around a particular issue, and create fascinating art out of it. While Shanabrook's art appears determined by the circumstances in which he has lived, one should nonetheless take his response to such circumstances as a particular type of choice: his art presents an individual perspective on the situations of his life, as well as on the inner dilemmas he attempts to address.

When contemporary ideology insists that people can fashion their life as an art project, it glorifies the idea of rational choice that has been dominating the domain of economic theory for quite some time. Late capitalism, with its insistence on choice, of course, only continues the old idea of the “self-made man” capitalism has always promoted. One can easily observe, however, that this discourse of endless possibilities that we can play out in our lives is concurrent with the talk of an increase of anxiety in today's society. This overwhelming insistence that the subject has a choice to make life into what he or she wishes has contributed to this escalation of anxiety. But why does the choice of a direction for one's life increase anxiety? Why is choice *per se* perceived as so troubling? Finally, in times of limitless choice, how do we address the fact that there is still no cure for death and aging?

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CHOICE

Albert Camus expressed quite a dramatic view on choice when he posed the question: “Shall I kill myself or have a cup of coffee?” This absurd dilemma nicely depicts, for the human being, how one’s very existence is always a matter of choice. It is not simply that subjects are overwhelmed by making choices about what kind of life to live—to continue living is the most important choice for the subject to make. The nature of this existential choice had already been an element of Kierkegaard’s analysis of anxiety when he perceived freedom as essentially linked to anxiety. His idea was that the subject is anxious because of “the possibility of possibility” that freedom entails, which is why the subject’s anxiety is primarily before him- or herself.² Sartre continued this line of thought in pointing out that the person who stands in front of the abyss is not anxious over the possibility of falling, but because one can throw him- or herself into the abyss.³

Freud shared important insight about choice when he discussed the choice of neurosis. He first mentioned the term *Neurosenwahl* in a letter to Fleiss, but actually developed it later in his paper on the sexual etiology of neuroses.⁴ Although at first Freud thought that the decision as to which neuroses the subject develops is dependent on specific characteristics of sexual events in early childhood, he later changed his mind and pointed out that traumatic childhood experiences do not necessarily incite neuroses. The latter are much more dependent on the nature of repression and defenses of the ego. Equally, it is not “a question of what sexual experiences a particular individual had had in his childhood, but rather of his reaction to these experiences—of whether he had reacted to them by ‘repression’ or not.”⁵ Freud perceives the subject’s defenses as reactions to the sexuality that the subject encounters. We need to perceive this reaction as a form of choice, which entails that the subject is responsible for his or her neurosis.⁶

Lacan also perceived subjectivization as linked to choice. However, choice is not perceived as some form of self-making, that is, of rationally deciding who one is or molding oneself into a work of art, as contemporary ideology seems to suggest. Subjectivization, for Lacan, is always linked to the field of the Other—the symbolic structure in which the subject lives. The subject can only be known in the place of the Other, which means that one cannot define a subject as self-consciousness. Lacan explains the logic of choice that pertains to subjectivization by imagining a story of three prisoners who are condemned to death, but who can escape this destiny if they are able to solve a particular puzzle.⁷ The prison warden informs the prisoners that each of them has either a black or a white disk on their back. In total, there are three white and two black disks. Out of this selection, the prison warden has chosen three—one disk for each prisoner. While the prisoners cannot see the color of their own disk, they can see the disks of the others. Their task is to determine the color of their own disk without talking to the others. The prisoner who will first solve this puzzle will be set free. If one prisoner has a white disk and the others each have a black, the one with the white disk has an easy task, insofar as he will immediately see

the two black disks and thus quickly come to the conclusion that he must have a white disk. In this case his eyes will be enough to win the game. Things become more complicated if one of the prisoners has a black disk and two have whites. Here we can imagine more hesitation, whereby prisoners try to figure out what the others see. The prisoner who, for instance, sees one black and one white disk will reason: “If I have a black disk, the prisoner with a white disk would have seen two black disks and thus have been able to leave the room, but since this does not happen I must have a white disk.” An even more complicated detour in thought is needed if each of the three prisoners has a white disk. Here all of them will reason in the following way: “I see two white disks. If I have a black disk the other two prisoners must guess whether they are black or white, as in the previous situation, when we had two white and one black disk. Since neither of the two other prisoners is making a move, I must be white myself and thus better stand up and leave.” In this case, each prisoner’s choice relies on the uncertainty of the others. Every prisoner hesitates, but only by seeing hesitation on the side of the other prisoners is one then able to make a gesture and stand up.

We can read this puzzle, which Lacan uses to describe the moment of subjectivization, as an explanation for how the subject “chooses” him- or herself. The subject is always dealing with the radical uncertainty as to who he or she is. Taking on a certain symbolic identity (that is, by making a proclamation: “This is me!”) involves a detour via the Other. First, we have the symbolic setting, the language in which the subject is placed. With the help of signifiers, the subject will make the gesture of acquiring symbolic identity. Second, we have the desire of the Other. Lacan’s image of the disk symbolizes the *object a* in the subject. The latter is always trying to guess what kind of an object he or she is in the desire of the Other. It is only through observing others, and speculating on what they see in us, that we try to define who we are for both them and ourselves.

The very fact that the subject becomes a speaking being involves a choice. The subject must go through the process of alienation, which involves a particular kind of loss. Lacan imagines this situation by presenting an intersection of two circles (the field of the subject and the field of the Other). On the side of the subject we have being, and on the side of the Other we have meaning, that is, language, institutions, culture, and so on—as what defines the field into which the subject is born. At the intersection between the subject and the Other, there is a place where the fields meet. This, however, is actually a place of non-meaning. As Lacan states: “The *vel* of alienation is defined by a choice whose properties depend on this, that there is, in the joining, one element that, whatever the choice operating may be, has as its consequence a *neither one, nor the other*. The choice, then, is a matter of knowing whether one wishes to preserve one of the parts, the other disappearing in any case.”⁸ Lacan illustrates this choice with the dilemma one faces when robbers demand “Your money or your life?” If one chooses money, one loses both, since one will be killed, but if one gives money, one also loses—that is, one will have life deprived of money.

In regard to defining who the subject is for him- or herself, Lacan stresses the future anterior in contrast to the past tense. This means: “I will be what I am now through my choice,” instead of “I am what I already was.” Similar to Freud, Lacan opposes the idea that the subject is determined by his or her past. There is always a moment of choice on the side of the subject in how the subject reacts to the past, even though this “choice” is perceived as a forced choice, that is, linked to the subject’s defenses. The traumatic nature of this choice stems from it entailing a loss and opening a void. The advent of the symbolic presented by the forced choice brings forth something that did not “exist” before, but which is nonetheless anterior to it, a past that has never been present.⁹ Through the act of forced choice we lose something that we never had, but we lost it no matter what.

Another important choice for the subject in the process of subjectivization involves the dilemma between *le pere ou pire*—the father or worse. Here too, in the end, we have no choice. To refuse the father in an attempt to maintain a relation with the maternal Thing means a loss of enjoyment, insofar as immersion in that impossible relation can only mean the annihilation of the subject. This is a choice between the law of the Father, castration, and the unlimited, menacing jouissance of the mother—psychosis.

The central point in all of these cases of “forced choice” is that we are not dealing simply with an absence of choice. Rather, the choice is offered and denied in the same gesture. However, the very fact that we have the gesture of choice, albeit as a forced one, accounts for the fact that the subject is not determined by external or internal forces. This also accounts for why subjectivity always involves a certain freedom, even if this freedom is only to form one’s own defenses. Any type of artistic, creative freedom follows this logic of forced choice: the artist always “chooses” a way of sublimating external and internal deadlocks that he or she encounters.

TRoubles WITH CAPITALISM

Why is choice suddenly a major problem in today’s society? A number of psychoanalysts and philosophers, for some time, have been debating whether late capitalism is turning into a society without limits, in which there is a lack of social prohibitions and where it appears that the symbolic law, as in the Name of the Father, no longer functions. Although the disappearance of traditional social prohibitions would appear to be liberating, it seems that rather than ignore traditional authorities people are constantly searching for new ones. In the choice between “*pere ou pire*,” however, people are often choosing the latter—“bad” versions of the father, like various gurus, religious leaders, self-help therapists, media icons, and so on.

In the early 1970s, Lacan observed that in a developed capitalist system, the subject’s relationship to the social field forms a particular discourse. In the “Discourse of Capitalism,” the subject

relates to the social field in such a way that one takes him- or herself as a master.¹⁰ The subject is not only perceived to be completely in charge of him- or herself, but appears to have the power to recuperate the loss of *jouissance*. Under capitalism, the subject is thus perceived as an agent possessing enormous power.

What does it mean for the subject to be placed in the position of such an agent? First, it appears as if this subject has been freed from subjection to history and genealogy, and is thus free from all signifying inscriptions. This seems to be the subject who has the freedom to choose not only objects that supposedly bring satisfaction but, even more, the direction of his or her life; that is, the subject chooses him- or herself. Therefore, this subject appears as being totally independent of the Other, and especially free from traditional authorities, like the family, the state, and so on.

Lacan suggests that one finds in the Discourse of Capitalism a rejection, or even further, the foreclosure of castration. This foreclosure results when society more and more often functions without limits, in which there seems to be a constant push toward some kind of limitless *jouissance*. This push to *jouissance* at all costs is especially visible in the many forms of toxic mania—from the excessive consumption of alcohol or drugs, to shopping, workaholism, and so on.¹¹ Capitalism, more and more, transforms the proletarian slave into a free consumer. However, limitless consumption paradoxically provokes the moment when the subject starts “consuming himself.” As a result, we observe both an increase of self-harm as well as an endless search for excessive enjoyment.

Although the subject in the Discourse of Capitalism is perceived to be completely in charge of him- or herself, and particularly free to make a multitude of choices, one sees a paradoxical trend in the fact that this possibility of choice opens the way for an increase of anxiety. One method of coping with this anxiety is a strong identification with the master. The latter allows the subject to relinquish his or her doubt, to avoid choice and responsibility, and thus in some way to provide relief for his or her own existence.

“AS IF”

In today’s society we do, in fact, witness changes in the self-perception of subjects, as well as in their perception of the Other. Some of the more pessimistic psychoanalysts, however, conclude that, as a result of the lack of traditional authorities and changes in the functioning of the symbolic law, one finds an increase of psychosis. Some analysts are looking closely at cases of “non-triggered psychosis,” in which there is no apparent delirium, in order to show that a person has a psychotic structure. Thus we have seen a revision of Helen Deutsch’s idea of so-called “as if” personalities: these are people who may not actually develop a full-blown psychosis like Schreber,

but nonetheless have a psychotic structure. Some analysts call these cases “ordinary psychosis” or “white psychosis.” What distinguishes these individuals from neurotics is that they often express enormous certainty with regard to their perception of reality. They are people without doubts.

One French psychoanalyst describes the case of a male patient who had a number of successful careers in his life. As a young man, he had befriended a lawyer in a prominent firm and became a successful lawyer himself. Then he met a sailor on the street and followed him into the merchant navy. Later, he encountered a businessman and subsequently turned himself into a successful businessman. Unlike Schreber, this was not a delusionary form of psychosis that was triggered by a particular event. Rather, it was a series of successful identifications, in which the patient not only mimicked other individuals, but also used these powerful identifications with people he randomly encountered to transform his whole life without experiencing any apparent anxiety or doubt about the path he had chosen. When the psychoanalyst asked the patient why, given his success, he felt it necessary to enter analysis, he simply replied, “My wife told me to do so.” Not surprisingly, he became a very successful patient!

In 1956, Lacan took the “as-if” (which is nowadays often referred to as a borderline structure) as the “mechanism of imaginary compensation” to which subjects have recourse who “never enter into the play of signifiers, except by a sort of exterior imitation.”¹² This form of imitation can easily be understood as another version of simulacra and sameness that Walter Benjamin often discussed. When the subject is caught in this imaginary dimension he or she has many problems with identity (or the interweaving of identity, illusions of doubles, and so on). One of the features of psychotics is that they are obsessed with mimicry, shaping themselves according to one set of ideas, and then just as quickly abandoning them, especially by strongly identifying with other people.

Early capitalism celebrated “the self-made man” who took entrepreneurial risks by exploiting his talent. Late capitalism has taken this a stage further and made the self-made man a commodity. There must surely be a small irony in the fact that Freud’s nephew, Edward L. Bernays (otherwise known as “The Father of Spin”), was one of the leading figures behind modern public relations in the beginning of the last century. One of Bernays’ great achievements was to introduce women to smoking by promoting the idea of women’s freedom. He believed, however, that people only buy something because an authority with whom they identify possesses that object. Contemporary marketing relies on the premise that you create your own style—that you find in fashion a distinctive expression of yourself. There is a definite irony in the fact that this ideology is effectively promoted through mass marketing and brand affiliation. Yet, is it really true that there are no authorities in the world other than the individual self? It seems clear that the ideological belief in an absence of authorities can only rest on new authorities, such as corporations.

But if these are the only authorities in the world really that different from the past? Are we really living in a limitless world? We have increasingly interventionist states, authoritarian-leaning leaders, and numerous other authorities in the form of self-help gurus, religious leaders, and the like. Given this situation, why does the ideology of the late-capitalist self encourage us to live “as if” we were without limits, as though we were free? Is the modern self, in some sense, out of touch with reality and delusional? Could we argue that late capitalism is producing more psychosis, as some psychoanalysts want to suggest?

This would be a duly simplistic and pessimistic conclusion. Certainly there is some evidence of the increasing plasticity of forms of identification. Players on the internet rarely appear as themselves, preferring in many cases to change not only their gender and sexual orientation, but also their race, religion, and age. There is nothing new in fantasizing about being someone else, but modern trends suggest something more profound. Among 18-to-25-year olds in the U.K., more people not only report having had a sexual experience with both a person of the same sex and of the opposite sex, but are unwilling to classify their sexuality on the basis of sexual practice. In terms of how they categorize themselves and others, the distinction gay/straight appears to have little purchase. As one commentator remarked, “Homosexuality is over!”¹³

Playing with your sexual identity, however, is not the same, in any sense, as Schreber’s delusion of being turned into a woman. Schreber had no doubt about his bodily transformation. Neither is it the same thing as the mimicry in the case of “the successful patient” described earlier, whose transformations caused him no anxiety nor any uncertainty. Those of us who are ceaselessly remaking ourselves in the contemporary moment, however, have many doubts, and can often feel overwhelmed by the fear of failure. Our play with identifications is quite different from the mimicry of the psychotic. His or her certitude is replaced in the contemporary moment with something that looks more like the celebration of undecidability. Yet this undecidability is itself caught up in capitalist circuits, as evidenced by the rise and subsequent marketing of the metrosexual. Rather than being a sexual identity, the metrosexual is more a set of consumer identifications. Under late capitalism, shifts in identity and, indeed, in identifications are celebrated as the new vogue and turned into profit.

Despite this process, there is little proof that contemporary society is increasingly psychotic. People are still deeply concerned with the question of who they are for others, and how they should interact with others. This is one reason, perhaps, for why we are seeing an increasing obsession with self-help books. We certainly live in a world that is self-centered and encourages us to “love ourselves.” However, to follow this imperative is not a simple matter, which is why finding and offering an answer to it is a lucrative business. A simple search on Amazon.com turns up 138,987 books that try to help you love yourself, including the *Learning to Love Yourself Workbook*, which certainly shows that labor is as important a part of capitalism today as ever before.

How does this increase in possibilities for making oneself into what one wants to be, and the media bombardments with such books, affect the subject? In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan points out: “The specular field is the field in which the subject is the most secure in terms of anxiety.”¹⁴ We can take the specular field as the dimension of the imaginary. All of the media slogans that encourage us to become ourselves are, for example, part of this field. In addition to the very strong bombardment from the imaginary field, today’s subject lives in a society in which the real, the non-symbolizable, appears as something that can be scientifically explained, that is, as something that can be covered by signifiers. Referring to Lacan’s seminar, Jacques-Alain Miller suggests that: “This point of view which comes from a sort of positivism assumes that the real is reduced to this knowledge and thus evaporates in this knowledge. It is a positivism for which anxiety is an illness which inhibits access to the real, while it is the inverse of what is proposed here, that anxiety is on the contrary the route access to the real.”¹⁵

We are dealing here with two different positions with respect to appeasing anxiety: first, on the level of the imaginary and, second, on the level of the symbolic. If, in the first plan, the real is covered by images, in the second plan the real appears as something that can be fully symbolized—uttered in words and scientifically explained. (Most of the self-help books on anxiety are full of advice, worksheets, and so on, as to how one can reduce anxiety with the help of signifiers.)

These two trends dominate today’s world. When we claim that the subject is currently perceived as a self-creator, we are depicting a scenario in which the subject is addressed as someone who can form his or her own mirror image. In the formation of the imaginary, the symbolic always plays the primary role. By the time the child goes through the mirror stage, the symbolic is already operative. When a little child observes his or her image in the mirror, the primary caregiver utters: “Look at yourself. This image in the mirror is you.” With the contemporary idea that the subject is a self-creator one can observe a slight difference in this call to the child. Observing the new types of children’s books, which encourage self-creation, one gets the impression that saying to the child: “This is you” has somehow been replaced by the idea that the child should be given the possibility of choosing how to see him- or herself. The title of the children’s book, *I am Special, I am Me!* nicely conveys this trend.¹⁶ It tells the story of a little boy, Milo, who wants to be become a pirate captain, but other kids say that he is too short. Afterwards, he wants to be a lion, but is told that he is too small; nor can he be a prince because he is supposedly not handsome enough. Finally, his mother convinces him that he is something special and can be whoever he wants to be. These types of books, in various ways, try to appease anxiety. They necessarily fail in this endeavor, however, since anxiety is an affect which touches the real and is therefore, as such, not signifiable.

When we speak of the particular anxiety that relates to choice, we must point out that anxiety relates to the fact that every choice involves a loss. Of course, even in everyday life, we have a

difficult time choosing because it seems like the loss of the possibility of choosing something else. For example, people described in psychology books as “commitment phobic” seem to have a particular problem with choosing libidinal objects. However, their inability to choose and make a long term attachment can be understood as not giving up on a lost object. One might envision that some of these people may have a problem giving up on the prohibited libidinal object (the mother), while others might have a problem giving up on the lack itself. Since no object will ever be able to fill up the lack, one finds a particular enjoyment in keeping all possible libidinal objects at bay.

NEW FORMS OF INTIMACY

Some psychoanalysts draw the conclusion that the Discourse of Capitalism leaves no space for love, and especially eliminates the space for sublime, courtly love. Instead, what we have is an increase of narcissistic illusion and a push toward sexuality with the hope that it will bring some lost jouissance. Many subjects today seem to have problems determining how to situate themselves in regard to sexual difference. Insofar as sexual identification is linked to the way in which the subject positions him- or herself after going through the process of castration, with the transformations at the level of the castration complex there appears to be a greater turn toward androgyny and bisexuality. However, the main problem is that in the Discourse of Capitalism, sexuality is perceived in a narcissistic way, as an endless process of seduction and fluctuation from one object to another.

If one cannot easily accept the pessimistic conclusion that psychosis is overwhelmingly present in late capitalism, one must nonetheless admit that something has changed in the subject’s relationship towards him- or herself, as well as society at large. Even further, it seems evident that there has been a change in the nature of limits, and that there is a greater push toward excessive jouissance.

Let us look at how the lack of limits affects personal relationships. In a society determined by the idea of choice, matters concerning love and sexuality at first seem to be extremely liberating. What could be better than envisioning the possibility of being free from social prohibitions when it comes to our sexual enjoyment. How wonderful it appears to finally stop worrying about what parents and society-at-large perceive as normal sexual relations; how liberating it seems to be able to change our sexual orientation, or even the physical appearance of sexual difference. It is more than obvious that such “freedom” does not bring satisfaction; on the contrary, it actually limits it.

From the beginning, in analyzing human desire, psychoanalysis has linked desire with prohibition. For the subject to desire, something must be off limits. When the subject struggles with the escalation of dissatisfaction, in regard to the non-attainability of his or her object of desire, the

solution is not to get rid of the limit in order to finally fuse with the object. Rather, it is to somehow be able to “cherish” the very limit and perceive the object of desire as worthy of our striving precisely on account of its inaccessibility.

Listening to the media discuss sexuality, it is not difficult to hear that there are very few things that are prohibited (with the exception of child molestation, incest, and sexual abuse), while there is an overwhelming “push to enjoy.” Sexual transgression is marketed as the ultimate form of enjoyment, with the idea being that if one works on it, learns its tricks and can relentlessly practice it, there are no limits to the satisfaction a person can achieve. *Cosmopolitan* thus encourages those who have not yet mastered new techniques of reaching ultimate joys to enroll in sex school. Simultaneous to this marketing of enjoyment, one reads in the popular media about the very impossibility to enjoy. John Gray, the famous author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* now writes about “Why my Grandmother seems to have more sex than I do?”¹⁷ His answer, once again, turns into another form of advice: be more relaxed, follow these steps for arousing desire, and so on.

When we look at how we deal with sexuality in this supposedly limitless society, it is easy to observe that limits have not actually disappeared and that prohibitions still exist. However, the locus where they emerge has changed. If, in the past, prohibitions were transmitted with the help of social rituals (like initiations in pre-modern society, and the functioning of the Names-of-the-Father under traditional patriarchal society), today the subject sets his or her own limits. The contemporary subject is thus not only self-creator, but also his or her own “prohibitor.”

NO CHOICE TO DIE

Although people seem to be free to choose the direction of their life, they appear powerless in front of what Baudelaire called “the figures of Time.” Aging, dying, and inscribing oneself into the succession of generations become more and more difficult in this time of the freedom of choice.¹⁸ While ideology promotes the illusion of the eternal present, aging and death remain the incurable. Today’s media present aging as something unacceptable, traumatic, and yet a matter of choice—it is up to every individual to “do” something against it. Even more, it is better to work on not showing the signs of aging, as well as to follow many proposed suggestions on how to prevent death. However, in the time of this freedom of choice, the idea that we can even imagine death as being a matter easily controlled and hopefully postponed very much lies behind today’s obsession, observable in the arts, with showing what death and dying actually look like.

In these times, in which we often hear that we live in an age of catastrophes, it should not be surprising that we witness the emergence of so-called catastrophe arts. In recent years, Mexican photographer Enrique Metinides has become an especially well-known representative of this field. Over the last forty years, Metinides has been compulsively collecting images of various

catastrophes, including car accidents, train crashes, suicide, fires, and so on. As in the case of Stephen Shanabrook, he is an artist who does not seem to be able to stop circulating around a particular theme. In addition, in Metinides' case, there is a particular childhood event that precipitated this passion to reflect on violence.

When Metinides was twelve years old, his father bought him his first camera, with which he was able to record numerous accidents that occurred at the intersection near his father's shop. Already as a teenager, Metinides became obsessed with recording various catastrophes. He was soon employed by a major newspaper as its youngest photographer, given a job solely devoted to recording human suffering. This passion for recording catastrophes continued throughout Metinides' life, resulting in thousands of photographs that have recently been exhibited in art galleries. After his retirement, Metinides stopped using his camera, however, and decided to start recording catastrophes on his VCR from the seven TV screens that he installed in his apartment.

The whole of Metinides's life has thus been dedicated to recording and cataloguing accidents. It looks as if Metinides has taken the uncontrollable (in the form of catastrophes and accidents) as something that can be put in order through cataloging. Metinides' organizing zeal went so far as creating special codes for policemen and ambulance attendants, so they would know what kind of injuries have occurred at the scenes of accidents. At the same time, Metinides has also started collecting toy versions of various rescue vehicles, from ambulances to fire-engines and police cars.

In regard to Metinides' fascination with catastrophes, one can only provisionally speculate as to why he devoted his whole life to this passion. Nestor Garcia Canclini, in his analysis of Metinides' work, takes Metinides' collection mania and his gaze of an all-embracing God as two attempts to "guard, foresee and avert risk."¹⁹ However, one could also say that Metinides tries to avert the highest risk we all must address: death.

The information we get about the way Metinides structures his life gives ample evidence that he has a problem with death, which psychoanalysis often observes with obsessional neurotics. The characteristic of the latter is that they want to be in control of everything in their lives, and especially in control of death. Often an obsessional plans all of his activities in detail; everything is well-programmed and organized in order to prevent something unexpected from happening. In particular, an obsessional tries to master his desire and the desire of the Other. He never gives up thinking, planning, and talking. What the obsessional dreads is to vanish as a subject—that is, to lose ground and, for example, lose himself in a passionate encounter with the object of his desire. In order to prevent this from happening, an obsessional will thus find all kinds of excuses, duties, tasks, and so on. This is why it is said that, for obsessionals, they are never at the place they seem to be. When the obsessional is, for example, in bed with a desired woman, in his head he will actually be somewhere else. At the time of intercourse, he might be fantasizing about having

sex with another woman in order to keep control of the situation he is in, and not allow himself to come too close to an enjoyment he finds overwhelming. Similarly, as the obsessional tries to prevent an encounter with desire and enjoyment, he tries to outsmart death.

In an interview, Metinides points out that his biggest fears are to be buried alive and to have an autopsy performed on him.²⁰ In the way his photographs capture death, one can observe an attempt to record death in order to be able to control it, and make it non-threatening. Thus his photographs, for example, either focus on the eyes of the observer and neglect the very accident, or they try to capture the opened eyes of the dead person who thus appears as undead. In a strange way, corpses in Metinides' work look as if they are still alive. Perhaps Metinides pictures death as not actually being death precisely in order to overcome his own horror of dying.

Lacan has characterized an obsessional as someone who constantly poses the question: "Am I dead or alive?" Since an obsessional is horrified not only by his own desire, but especially by the desire of the Other, he first attempts to rid himself of this desiring Other. He does this in order to take the place of the Other (for example, an authority), so as to impose the orders and prohibitions that might have come from the Other. In order to prevent something unexpected coming from the Other, the obsessional becomes an Other himself. The obsessional hopes that with the death of the desiring Other, he will finally be free to live. However, through the ritual of continuously imposing upon himself new rules and prohibitions, the obsessional is himself becoming the living dead. He becomes a robot-like creature, seemingly drained of desire.

Is today's society, with its insistence on choice (and the control that accompanies it), not in some way privileging an obsessional attitude toward life? Instead of claiming that there is an increase of psychosis in today's society, one can conclude that the insistence on choice in all domains of our lives has given rise to an obsessive need for control and predictability. However, by constantly following advice on how to shape one's body, how to curb one's desires, how to guide one's life, and especially how to prevent death, the subject obtains no greater certainty or control over his or her life. The flip side of such obsessional attempts at mastery is an increasing feeling of guilt and anxiety.



1. When we hear that children need to be encouraged to develop “self-worth” we cannot escape the feeling that the worth we are referring to is the worth that the market deals with.
2. See Soeren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. R. Thomte and A.B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
3. See Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. H. E. Bernes (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2002).
4. Sigmund Freud, “Extracts from the Fliess papers,” Letter 46, May 30, 1896, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter *S.E.*), ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 1: 231.
5. Sigmund Freud, “My Views on the Part Played by Sexuality in the Aetiology of the Neuroses,” *S.E.*, 7: 275.
6. For more on the “choice of neurosis” see Colette Soler, “Hysteria and Obsession,” in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996). 248-282.
7. Jacques Lacan, “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 161-175.
8. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Norton, 1981), 211.
9. See Malden Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation,” *Oui Parle* 6:2 (Spring-Summer 1993): 88-9.
10. Jacques Lacan developed this theory in his lecture at the University in Milan on May 12, 1972. The original text is unpublished.
11. One type of critique of late capitalism points to the fact that the consumer is just a semblant of the agent, who only follows a semblant of freedom. In reality, he or she is under the pressure of demand. Currently, this demand is not coming from the master signifier, but from the place of jouissance—*object a*.
12. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychosis, 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993), 193.
13. I am indebted to Henrietta Moore for this assessment of U.K. culture.
14. See Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre X, L’angoise (1962-63)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 386.
15. Jacques-Alain Miller, “Reading Jacques Lacan’s Seminar on Anxiety,” trans. Barbara P. Fulks, *Lacanian ink* 26 (Fall 2005): 19.
16. Ann Meek and Sarah Massini, *I am Special, I am Me!* (New York: Little Tiger Press, 2006).
17. This theme was discussed on John Gray’s web site. See <<http://www.marsvenus.com>> (1 July 2006)
18. See Jean Pierre Lebrun, *Un monde sans limite. Essai pour une clinique psychanalytique du social* (Paris: Eres, 1997), 250. See also, Charles Melman, *L’homme sans gravité: Jouir à tout prix* (Paris: DeNoel, 2002).
19. Néstor García Canclini, *Enrique Metinides* (London: Photographers Gallery, 2004), 22.
20. Ibid.