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Multiple Symptoms and the Visible Real: Culture, Media, and the Displacements of Vision

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The enigmatic character of culture resides in the latter's inability to directly represent the social malaise of which it is the visible symptom. In psychoanalytic terms, the *meaning* of the symptom is not directly accessible on the surface, and the visual cannot guarantee an adequate decoding of the manifestation of the symptom in all its meaningfulness. Freud underlines the necessity of *analysis* by insisting that "the causation of those symptoms without taking into account the mechanism of the formation of the ... symptom...involves an inevitable loss of completeness and clarity..." 1 Psychoanalytic analyses of visual culture are generally structured along a topology of depth and surface: the manifest symptom and the latent cause, the visible symptomal culture and the invisible Real cause.

This essay interrogates precisely this topology: does this logic of a surface symptom and a Real depth withstand critical analysis? This essay argues that a historical and conceptual rethinking of visible culture results in the Symptom and the Cause

appearing *next* to each other. A lateral rather than a depth model of symptomatic readings is required to understand some of the most powerful manifestations of media culture.

The mass-mediated fascination with traumatic events, the proliferation of images of disaster and horror, and the shifting relationship between the subject and the object of the eye in contemporary visual culture form the locus of this essay's investigation of the symptom. Symptom-formation, as Freud points out, can have a crucial visual function in that the zone in which the initial cause excites the body is displaced onto another zone of the body – "the formation of the symptoms takes place in regions of the mental apparatus which are more remote from the particular centres concerned with somatic control." He goes on, a few lines later, to note, "in scopophilia and exhibitionism, the eye corresponds to the erotogenic zone". [2] Ocularcentrism becomes the obsessional repetition and the substitute satisfaction of this displaced zone of the eye from its original site of disturbance; opticality is reconfigured in its excessive function through visual plenitude. This displacement will be analysed in the media coverage of natural disasters. Both the media's active solicitation of "raw witness footage" and the modalities of the scopophilic drive to view death and destruction function as the "mechanisms of symptom formation" through which the Real emerges as the excessively visual cause. These two dimensions – the *active* solicitation of scopophilia by visual culture's fascination with disaster and the *displaced* functioning of the eye in the viewing subject – will be analysed in their contemporary historical formation.

The mutual conflict between drive and law – when unresolved – leads to repression. The symptom as the after-effect of this blocked reconciliation fails to come into consciousness – "the excitations in the unconscious... are '*incapable of becoming conscious*'". [3] The drive literally "breaks through" the blockage of repression. Yet the force by which it does so is not uncomplicated:

> ...the repressed impulse, which was now *unconscious*, was able to find means of discharge and of substitutive satisfaction by circuitous routes and thus to bring the whole purpose of the repression to nothing. In the case of conversion hysteria the circuitous route led to the somatic innervation; the repressed impulse broke its way through at some point or other and produced *symptoms*. The symptoms were thus results of compromise, for although they were substitutive satisfactions they were nevertheless distorted and deflected from their aim owing to the resistance of the ego. [4]

The displacement from one zone (generally erotogenic) to another suggests that if substitute satisfaction (symptom) takes place through the mediation of a body-part then such a part itself is compromised. Visual analysis cannot analyze the object in order to decipher the Real behind it if such analysis does not acknowledge the eye and opticality itself. The eye is the compromised

site of the displaced drive. The viewing subject's faith in the eye may be undermined if it assumes the eye as a non-ideological tool for deciphering the Real. There may be a cathexis of the eye itself – an over-investment in it – that Freud terms *besetzung*: occupation and interest. 5

The relevance of a "compromised eye" to a reading of psychic displacement for social and cultural analysis needs to be argued. Many cases of Freudo-Marxism – from the Frankfurt School to Jameson and Zizek – make such an argument. 6 Both Jameson and Zizek interpret the "mechanisms of the function" of symptom-formation through language and history. Lacan argues that "... the symptom resolves itself entirely in an analysis of language, because the symptom is itself structured like a language..." 7 The assumption that the analysis of language reveals the cause of the symptom contradicts Lacan's statement that the symptom is "written in the sand of the flesh and on the veil of Maia". 8 The reference to "sand of the flesh" can be read as the instability of the body itself – which I have highlighted as the surface on which a displacement in the site of the symptom takes place. The body's instability – including that of the "compromised eye" – is the site of a displacement from another zone. The eye – and the object that the eye apprehends – are both symptoms written on the shifting grounds of displacements. The domains of displacement in both these symptoms will be historically analysed in the visual text and the function of the eye.

Rather than simply adduce the invisible Real as the scopophilic investment in imagery of death lurking behind a cultural

text, this argument interrogates the dimension of visibility in the shifting domain of contemporary capitalist visual culture. In attention to the shifts in media and visual culture – and to the location of the subject – I will argue that the mechanism through which the symptom manifests itself as the after-effect of the cause requires a rethinking of the place of the visible in culture. This solicitation of the Real´s visuality in contemporary media culture remains coded. However, this coding has shifted from the visible/invisible dimension to one of a mobile assemblage of cultural texts that as a network – or a web – actively unveil what formerly subsisted as the hidden cause through the coded symptoms of culture. The symptom remains the starting point of analysis – yet the location and the meaning of the Real are not hidden. The necessity of analysis is less of a movement below in a topology of surface and depth and more of a movement sideways, laterally across the different elements of a networked visual culture. The Real appears *beside* the Symptom. Culture is paradoxically the mark of the *visibility* of the Real as the absent Cause. The Real now manifests itself in the realm of visual culture by actively calling attention to itself.

Eye-ing the Real

The visual spectacle of manmade disasters appeals to viewers because they are unpredictable. In the case of natural disasters, such as the Pacific tsunami of 2004 and the Gulf Coast hurricane Katrina of 2005, the sheer helplessness of an ignorant public (tsunami) and the inability of an under-class to escape (Hurricane Katrina) marked their uniqueness. These events revealed the media hysteria and the

public's consumption of such hysteria. The "appeal" of disasters to the media and to a viewing public surely should not be an unproblematic cause for fascination and pleasure. The never-before televised spectacle of natural disaster occasioned the dramatic exposure of the *attraction* of trauma, death, and destruction. Rather than couched only in terms of the "provision of information" and the "public interest," the incessant media attention visually dramatized what, in Freudian terms, one could call the exposure of an "abnormal impulse" which became symptomatized across our television screens. This normally repressed desire – visually manifest under the pretext of "provision of information" or "public interest" – now relinquished all such pretence. The fascination and affective investment in viewing and re-viewing the footage of the destruction of human life was fully – and symptomatically – exposed.

The repeated solicitation of survivors' experiences in words, images, and amateur footage on video comprised one technique of visualizing the Real. The example of the BBC holds particular interest given its reputation for the solidity of its public profile and the reputation of its dispassionate reporting. The full-blown visibility of what had been an open secret coded through "public interest" became especially visible on this TV network. The unabashed hunger for raw footage of human death in its happening was announced by newsreaders and through Internet websites. Newsreaders even invited viewers to contribute their own amateur footage of the disaster. This aural invitation appeared in written form at the end of the broadcast. The mode of address to the reader/viewer undermined the rhetoric of objective coverage; rather, such

coverage played on sensationalism: "We want you to be our eyes!" proclaimed the BBC website 9 in solicitation of viewers' own pictures of the Katrina hurricane. The Internet exploited the public's fascination with images. "Katrina: Are you a survivor? Have you arrived back to the UK from the region hit by the hurricane? Send us your comments and experiences," invited the BBC World website. On a special website entitled "Hurricane Katrina: Reader's Pictures" we are offered pictures of destroyed houses, upturned boats, and menacing waves. All photographs are captioned with the name of the contributor – and with dramatic quotes, such as "Charlene Grall, Shenandoah, Miami: This is the side of my house before we started the clean-up. I am presently on day five of no electricity, but I thank God it was not worse, like those poor souls in the Gulf Coast." 10

This fascination with both human destruction and the sensationalization of such events was visible on the news broadcast of September 4th when a newsreader demanded that the US correspondent of the BBC provide more information on the alleged rape of women survivors in the city. 11 The reporter replied that these reports had been exaggerated in order to deflect attention from the racism involved in the failed emergency relief for the (primarily poor and black) survivors in New Orleans. The newsreader's question underlines the network's sensationalization of the event: the abstract institutional facts about the failed relief effort for the predominantly black and poor population is downplayed in favor of sensational coverage of alleged rape. A section of the BBC World website entitled "Reader's

Experiences" collects survivor quotes which highlight the dramatic emotional side of the aftermath of the disaster. The first contribution – a man named Ihsan Mahdi in New Orleans – included the words "Now I have a taste of what people in war ravaged countries go through. Please pray for us. My future is murky. My children cannot grasp the scope of this catastrophe. My friends are missing. Take me away from this madness." 12 The words are matched with dramatically posed and composed photographs, including that of a white man peering through bars outside of his home. On the walls of the house are scrawled: "I am sleeping inside with a big dog, an ugly woman, two shotguns and a clawhammer. Looters will be shot". 13

The visual material on the TV screen, the verbal reporting and commentary, the invitations on websites – through the over-invested eye, the interested ear, and the click of the mouse – the fascination with disaster spread across different domains of the media and the connected functions of the experiential body.

We witness two important developments taking place at the level of the visual text. First, the visual text is not only the distanced viewing of a mute document, but it is the actively contributed text of another possible viewer. Only this viewer (and there were many) is part of the very horror that is being audio-visualized. The externality from which a viewer (and an analyst) confronts and decodes a symptom (the visual text) has been disturbed. The viewer is implicated within the very symptom – the coded text – under analysis. Of course, the subject/analyst always bears some relation to the symptom. However, the external non-

dynamic position of scopophilia (the pleasurable look of the eye) changes when the image becomes an audio-visual text that circulates and changes continually. The mode of access and the experience of the text are highly dynamic given the endlessly repeating footage of the drowning people on Internet websites and television broadcasts. The coding of the text changes. The text is partly produced by the viewer – or by any possible viewer like her – rather than by a specialized reporter commissioned to travel with an army to record the war.

The coding of the text as a visual and aural symptom has its condition of possibility in shifts in recording and broadcasting technology. Rather than a discrete text produced and disseminated in a one-directional system, the active solicitation of footage makes the viewer actively engaged through the work of recording with home video, the process of emailing with the computer, and the task of mailing and engaging with the network. Even if the viewer is not a direct contributor she is reminded of her own cathexis of the horrific events through the solicitations of material by television and website media. The investment is not a secret – some pathological abnormal impulse that remains hidden from the public – rather, it is acknowledged and repeatedly invoked. The secret desire is visible for all to see.

What is made visible and what is coded? The historical shift in both the relation of viewer/analyst to visual text and the change in the character of the text (audio-visual and part of a network of TV screen and computer screen) mark a change in the mechanisms whereby the symptom is coded. Fredric Jameson, for example,

underscores the rise of mass publishing and serialization of literature (form of the text) and the historical context in his symptomal readings of literary texts. This historical shift in the coding of visual culture is made possible by the technologically-mediated function of the media and by the changing relationship of the scopophilic subject to the object of the eye.

The very cause itself becomes exposed – that is, the absent cause, the *raison d'être* of the media, becomes visible within capitalist culture. The hunt for higher media ratings accompanies a desire that formerly could not speak its name, in its own name, in the public – namely, the "obscene" fascination with images of human disaster. In openly advertising its own investment as media in the horrific footage of a wall of water's sweeping away and drowning people, the sound of screams as onlookers by the camera watch from a distance, and the like, the material becomes not the repressed Real, that which remains invisible. Rather, like the symptom, the image itself, its cause becomes apparent, its appearance matches the proliferation of the symptoms as coded texts of this unspeakable – but nevertheless visible – desire. In 2005, at the anniversary of the tsunami, major public television networks in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan, and Britain all "remembered" the tsunami through the broadcast of amateur footage, foregrounding "raw intensity" through images and sound that sutured the spectator into the event. The competition for ratings – for finding the latest uncovered amateur footage – remains a global struggle to ascertain and broadcast that special piece of "experience" not yet discovered and aired by any other network. The

ambivalence of the "appeal" of such imagery disappears. The images themselves, as coded and visible symptoms, celebrate the unspeakable desire – the pleasure gained from the repeated viewing of such imagery. It is too simple to argue that a fascination with the destruction of life is the hidden drive that is repressed by the injunctions of the Ego. The circuitous routes, through which the symptoms manifest themselves, as I have tracked above, mark the crucial role of capitalist commodification of death - that is, the nexus between an obscene desire and an historical structuring of the social order through capitalism.

Conclusion

The 'reality' to which conformist psychoanalysis refers as a norm of psychic 'sanity' is not neutral reality as such, but the historically specified form of *social* reality. [14]

Most historical analyses of social ills and their symptoms assume Capital as the Real, the cause, of an increasingly obscure complex reality. In his narratological reading of the phenomenal experience of Robert Portman's Bonaventure Hotel, Jameson suggests that experience of temporal/spatial dislocation and the inability to "cognitively map" the individual's place in the complex trajectories of Late Capitalism require an expansion of the human sensorium. [15] If faith in visual analysis and a reliance on ocular-centric knowledge is historically undermined by both the compromised location of the eye in the human body and the unreadable ciphers of visual culture, then a symptomal reading of visual culture needs to address both of these compromise-

formations as mechanisms of the formation of symptoms.

Paradoxically, then, it is not invisibility (of the human subject within a incomprehensibly complex system) but excessive visibility that emerges as the condition of possibility of contemporary visual culture. To engage in a symptomatology of contemporary visual culture the analyst must recognize that in the scopophilia of disaster imagery, for example, the human subject is repeatedly invited and inserted into an active-process of contributing, seeing, and being-seen. Rather than the *film noir* paranoid subject of Late Capital, it is the enjoying spectator-agent of (post-postmodernism?) who experiences a re-orientation of the visual. The media's open competition and insistent invitation of the spectator to see and to contribute to the imagery of death exposes previously repressed enjoyment that had been enjoyed under wraps. The expansion of the network of sensory apprehension, from the eye to the ear to the hand, plots another network across the body's human sensorium that implicates the subject and the analyst in the object of sense.

Often symptomal readings simply interpret the surface of the visual/verbal text without an analysis of the formal compositional and distributed properties of what, in Lacanian terms, one could call inscriptions. For example, Slavoj Zizek's readings, from Wagner's *Parsifal,* to Lynch's *Blue Velvet,* to anti-Semitic jokes, do provide useful illustration of a symptomal reading, although these interpretations often simplistically read the content of the image or the meaning of the word without attention to the ways in which, in Freud's terms, the texts

are coded as visual/aural symptoms. The analysis of the form of the visual text, as the actively solicited end-result of a media network that encompasses different technologies, shifts the relationship between the symptom and the cause. The cause as the disaggregated logic of capital coded through the multiplicatory logic of media culture is neither absent, nor invisible, nor outside of the text; rather, the symptom and the Real both emerge in visual form: the symptom coded through the technological and historical mutation in the media; and the Real as displaced from a depth/surface topology to a lateral, networked dimension *across* the different domains of the visual text, including digital video (the viewer), the computer-screen (website), and the television screen. Under the older regime of uni-directional televisual production prior to the wide-spread use of digital technology like home video, such a networked identification of the cause, of which the symptom is the coded form, would have been impossible.

Psychoanalysis as a tool for a critique of capitalism underscores the necessity of the ways in which psychical structure and social power interpenetrate each other. In this case Freud's thesis about repression is turned inside-out. If capital is the Real, that which appears only through the symptoms in which it is coded, then the obscene plenitude of visual culture exposes the nexus between capitalism and a repressed desire. 16 Repression necessitates a coding of the "unpleasure" in its visible appearance as a symptom. However, the excessive visuality of the nexus between capitalism and visual culture in my analysis displaces this thesis. *Contra* Freud, repression now functions as the injunction to enjoy – to

enjoy the "appeal" of a visual fascination in death and destruction shorn of all ambivalence. The mass-mediated invitation to actively participate in the proliferation of images and stories of disaster and death marks an injunction to enjoy rather than to repress. 17 Both visible culture and the active viewer obey the injunction to "repress your repression." The repressed fascination with death in all its visual "appeal" now actively solicits; the media dispatches with all pretensions of distanced objectivity. Visual culture makes this technocratic marketing of the repressed ever more visible in visual culture.

The displacement of both sites of symptoms – from the occult zone of the eye to the aural zone of the ear in the subject, the dispersal of the text across media forms of TV and computer screen – carries important implications for the protocols of hermeneutic analyses of visual culture. What is called into question is the positionality of the viewer/analyst in relation to the symptom. This interrogation undermines "the hermeneutic mastery over the social and cultural symptoms [the analyst] diagnoses" by positioning the site of analysis within the network of symptoms under analysis. 18 I extend Tim Dean's critique of Zizek's symptomal analyses through the historicization of the codings of the symptomal text and the increasing visibility of the Cause.

At the level of both the scopophilic drive of the media viewer and the symptomatic dimensions of visual culture the relationship of Symptom to Cause is re-oriented. Visibility accrues to both as a result of the shift in the relationship between the subject and the object. The coding of both symptom

and cause through the technologically-mediated inter-activity of visual culture reorients the place of the visible within visual culture. If the Real is the absent place of the Gaze that offers the world as the "given-to-be-seen" to the viewing subject, then this Gaze reveals itself to the scopophilic drive. The absent Gaze of the Real itself becomes the visible object of subjective specularity. [19] The fascination with the imagery of destruction exposes the socially repressed fascination with the death drive within the nexus of capitalism and visual culture. Clark argues "it is only in the discovering of the system's antinomies and blank spots...that the first improvised forms of contrary imagining come to light." [20] In contemporary visual culture it is the system's hyper-visible coding of images that makes the Real visible between the light of multiple screens, the sight of the eye, the touch of the mouse-click, and the sounds of the ear.

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and the Public Sphere, edited by Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2006; and "Suspending the Body: Biopower and the Contradictions of Family Values in Les Terres Froides, in Shooting the Family: Transnational Media and Intercultural Values, edited by Wim Staat and Patricia Pisters, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2005. He can be reached at s.m. dasgupta@uva.nl.

1. Sigmund Freud, "Draft K," in Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995), 107. From now on FR.

2. "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality"[1905], *FR*, 257.

3. Sigmund Freud, "Nineteenth Lecture: Resistance and Repression," in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968 [1924]), 306. It was delivered as part of a lecture series in Vienna between 1915-1917. Emphasis in original.

4. Sigmund Freud, "An Autobiographical Study," in *FR*, 19. First published in 1925. Emphasis in original.

5. As Peter Gay points out, the term "cathexis" is understood by Freud in more colloquial terms as "charge" or "interest." *FR*, 89.

6. Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Social Symbolic Act* (London and New York: Routledge edition, 2002) provides the most in-depth articulation of the value of psychoanalysis for his cultural critique. See in particular the chapter "On Interpretation." Slavoj Zizek's first thorough-going articulation of the relationship between symptomal reading through Marx and Freud can be found in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989). Jason Glynos provides an excellent reading of the relation between Marxism and Psychoanalysis in "There is no Other of the Other: Symptoms of a decline in Symbolic Faith, or

Zizek's Anti-Capitalism," *Paragraph* 22, 2 (2001). ⬆

7. Jacques Lacan, "The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis" in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: Norton, 1977), 59. ⬆

8. Lacan, 69. ⬆

9. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/2780295.stm#yourpics ⬆

10. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/4194424.stm ⬆

11. News bulletin, BBC World, September 4, 2005, 1400 hours. ⬆

12. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4200608.stm ⬆

13. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/americas/2005/hurricane_katrina/default. stm Picture no. 6 in the "Picture Highlights" section. ⬆

14. Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in and out of Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 47. Emphasis in original. ⬆

15. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping" in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, Eds. *Marxism and the Interpenetration of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). ⬆

16. For an argument that underlines the specific connection between media and capitalism, see Toby Miller, *The Well-Tempered Self: Citizenship, Culture and the Postmodern Subject* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993). ⬆

17. For one such articulation, see Slavoj Zizek, *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 2000), 23-24. ⬆

18. Tim Dean, "Art as Symptom: Zizek and the Ethics of Psychoanalytic criticism," *Diacritics* 32, 2, 2002, 23. ⬆

19. Antonio Quinet's emphasizes that the Lacanian reading of Merleau-Ponty's absent "Gaze" makes the Real itself implicated in the viewing subject's relation to the object world. See "The Gaze as an Object" in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (New York: State University of New York, 1995), 139-148.

20. T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 165.

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