

I. Physician work and textual analysis:

I aim to investigate how “modernity” could be regarded as “traumatic” in the sense that it causes certain symptoms to persist in our culture and society. This claim is juxtaposed with the claim that the traumatic afflictions of modernity show symptoms like those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that are perpetuated in “postmodernity.”

What this Series is About:

This series surveys a wide variety of “symptoms” in literature, newspapers, and urban landscapes that display a strong affinity to what clinical psychology may call “trauma.” Then, I will compare my observation of these symptoms in perspective to two messy, debatable terms, “modernity” and “postmodernity.”

First, by surveying the writings of Charles Baudelaire, Félix Fénéon, and magazine articles documenting peculiar events and incidents taking place in New York at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, I aim to sketch a type of life that is coming to shape in the fin-de-siècle Europe and America that finds its symptoms reflected in what we call “traumatic” today: an event, or a series of events whose force exceeds one’s ability to make sense of or emotionally process it, usually leading to symptoms of PTSD.

Then, focusing on Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth’s work, I mark two traumatic symptoms: “impulse to repeat” and “suspension of reality,” where a patient suffering from PTSD experiences repetition of the traumatic event in the form of flashbacks and nightmares, and that the patient may suffer from dissociative episodes where reality appear “unreal.” Following this, I analyze, with the help of Mark Fisher’s writings, the contemporary musical scene, movie production, and architecture. Citing Fredric Jameson, I claim that both symptoms could be found in the cultural production and urban landscape of “postmodernity.” However, it must be emphasized that my mapping of traumatic symptoms onto the ambiguous and contested concepts of “modernity” and “postmodernity” must be accompanied by my insistence on these terms’ lack of conceptual clarity. Rather, it is a strategic use of their rhetorical and historical strength to explore a set of symptoms.

Justifications:

It may be suspected that I aim to produce a grotesque patchwork of literary analysis, cultural studies, philosophy, and clinical psychology, or, more charitably put, interdisciplinary work. Yet it must be noted that the starting point of this project is strictly philosophical, especially when it is conceived as “a symptomatology, and a semeiology” (Deleuze, Nietzsche, 3). What does this mean? It means that I aim to think through a set of cultural and societal phenomena as symptoms “whose sense must be sought in the forces that produce them,” in the image of a “philosopher-physician” (Deleuze, Nietzsche, 75). To do philosophy as a symptomatology “is always a question of art” because, much like how Deleuze, analyzing Sade

and Masoch's writings, claims that "the clinical specificities of sadism and masochism are not separable from the literary values peculiar to Sade and Masoch," whose experience, historical, social, and cultural milieu all reflected in their writings as symptoms, I propose a similar kind of analysis for writers like Baudelaire (Coldness and Cruelty 14). Even more boldly speaking, I propose cityscapes, architectures also contain "senses and values" that are the primary subject of philosophy as symptomatology, for their construction and formation also reflect a whole complex relation of forces behind their coming-to-be.

Therefore, it seems imperative that I should provide both the clinical and philosophical framework for the analysis, because "history of medicine" is regarded from two perspectives, with the first being "the history of illnesses, which may disappear, become less frequent, reappear or alter their form according to the state of the society and the development of therapeutic methods" (Deleuze, Coldness, 15). For example, how we coin the terms of "railway spine," "shell-shock," "PTSD," and "Epigenetic Trauma." However, these are terms or names for a set of symptoms that are subject to change, revision, or even cancellation. This brings us to the second perspective, i.e. "the history of symptomatology, which sometimes precedes and sometimes follows changes in therapy or in the nature of diseases"—in short—"symptoms are named, renamed and regrouped in various ways" (Deleuze, Coldness, 15). While finding the clinical history of PTSD interesting, I am more interested in how these symptoms emerge, and perhaps how are they grouped together, because when we take social and cultural symptoms as subjects of examination, even the naming and grouping of these symptoms into a term or a category can be a symptom in itself: why is it grouped this way? And to illustrate with a question: What makes a Victorian doctor think that what we would today call PTSD is due to pure physical shock to the spine?

Implications:

What this section may lead to is a general study of how philosophy as a symptomology could be used to read not just text, but cultural production and architecture.

2. Modernity as Symptom 1: Literary Examination

[Examination of Literary Works Will be Inserted Here. One from Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*, a general study of Félix Fénéon's *Novels in Three Lines*, Newspaper excerpts from the turn of the century NYC about various incidents.

All this literature captured a certain intensification of movement, almost violent. The surplus being used as an investment for a new batch of productive capital, the growth of profit, the rapidity of transportation, the growth of skyscrapers, the rising smoke of London smog of the Victorian era, and the overwhelming amount of sensory input that exceeds one's capacity to process are all part of the modern scheme, the motifs that epitomize the modernity. It is this same motion of accumulation that sets the definitive character of lyric poetry in Walter

Benjamin, the shock that would be the central productive and creative force of poetry, and it would “sterilize this incident for poetic experience” when “it were incorporated directly in the registry of conscious memory.”¹ In a sense, the shock experienced by lyric poets is to be the libido of poetry creation only when it is not integrated into consciousness, only when it is represented as *mémoire involuntaire*. The question, then, is what kind of literature is created through such a process? What is the symptom of the literature we just surveyed?

The question is essentially a question of what shocked the poet and how the poet was shocked. The action of parrying shocks assaulting one from all directions is not a privileged activity reserved especially for lyric poets. It is characteristic of Benjamin’s observation, which is that “[the] interpersonal relationships of people in big cities are characterized by a markedly greater emphasis on the use of the eyes than on that of the ears.”² You don’t wish to be blind in a city, for you will run into people all the time, or perhaps fall into a manhole due to the poor urban planning. You do not listen attentively for the sound of the bus that has its wheels rubbing on the ground from a far distance, you look out for the bus that is coming for you with the impatient driver on his third shift. You will need good eyes to make up for the ears obfuscated by the cars humming their engines around, by people talking, by music played in stores, etc. [insert again Baudelaire’s writings on a poet’s observation of the crowd in general.]

Amongst the interwoven web of a massively complex transportation system filled with numerous heads, one is subjected to a continuing flow of loss. To see a car pass by with flashing speed, to see people getting on and off on a bus, to be with others in a hermetically sealed place like a subway or train, only to bid them farewell the very next second, all contribute to a sense of constant loss that is different from the traditional “travel from this village to the other on a slow cart or carriage” experience. The coincidence with trauma here is one of constant bereavement, where the visage, the locus of establishing an ethical and personal relation, is always in a state of afterimage because there is no capturing one’s image unless you dedicate yourself to a career of professional stalking. This bereavement is “a farewell forever which coincides in [Baudelaire’s] poem with the moment of enchantment.”³ The “agitated veil” of the crowd through which Baudelaire sees Paris is common to all city dwellers, which consists of imposed activities like being pushed around, or spotting a visage in a surging tide of crowd, only to have it lost and replaced by a new face new second. The experience in a modern city is therefore traumatic in the sense that one experiences physical dizziness from transportation and psychical dizziness, a recurring loss when being placed in a crowd that is constantly moving without its own telos.

3. Modernity Diagnosis: Equalization, Homogenization, and Eternal Present

There is a central axiom that dominates modern cities: clock time.

1 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Cape, 1970), pp.162.

2 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 191.

3 *ibid*, 169.

“He becomes an appendage of the machine.”⁴ Is it a passage referring to Chaplin’s movie *Modern Times*? Chronologically speaking, no. Formally speaking? Yes. The proletarian condition described by Marx has become the collective experience of the modern era. Like works when the industrial revolution first ignited its engine, the subjugation to a machine rhyme became more and more prevalent. For young and old alike, “technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training.”⁵ The mortar shells and the motor engines are both the contraptions of an industry that surrounded us and gave us a new sensation of time. A machine time. Lyotard’s observation of technology is more than fitting: “[technologies] don’t respond to a demand coming from human needs. On the contrary, human entities (individual or social) seem always to be destabilized by the results of this development.”⁶ The human subject, henceforth, is rendered incapable of processing the stimuli, incapable of integrating the rapidly revolutionizing experience and capital models, and a permanent sense of loss attributed to this sense of unintergrability.

Repetition is a central pattern for both modernism and trauma. The assembly line renders mass production possible through a series of adaptations to machine time, and technologies like photography and film allowed the affordable replication of artworks that were confined only to a specific group of people before. In short, what we witness in the process of reproduction of the artwork, according to Benjamin, is the loss of the aura, immediacy and authenticity of the artwork. Moreover, just as in the traumatic repetition, where “the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing,” the reproductive order of the artwork takes on the meaning on its own.⁷ “The work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility,” just as the repeated traumatic experience becomes trauma in itself.⁸ The modern invention and reorganization of productive relations provide repetition of traumatic experiences. Such is essentially the modern sensation experienced by Baudelaire: “the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock.”⁹ Reproduction of films, one of the most prominent modern art forms, marks the height of such transition from aura-infused art into the order of pure reproduction where the first paragraph of Debord’s *Society of Spectacle* perfectly captures: “[everything] that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”¹⁰ The shattered graphics in Debord’s *Mémoires* can be read as a shocked psyche traversing the highly modernized cities.

When space and time are compressed into clock time, the flow of time is suppressed. The notion of a mathematical time prompts intersubstitutability, where “one subordinate clause can be substituted for the other without harm to the truth” (Frege, *Sense and Reference*, 45). It diminishes the importance of differences for industrial efficiency and temporal linearity, which

4 Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, New York: Norton, 1978), pp.479.

5 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 175.

6 Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Defining the Postmodern”, 1387.

7 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 65.

8 Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018) pp. 981.

9 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 194.

10 Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle* (Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red, 2018), pp.1.

makes history a line of progression capable of being reversed and exposed under retrospection by a perpetual present—We Moderns. Modernism expresses “a changed consciousness of time” whose icon is “the vanguard and the avant-garde,” aesthetic conquistador “invading unknown territory [and] conquering an as yet unoccupied future” (Habermas, *Modernity - An Incomplete Project*, 100). Modernism, then, found itself manifesting itself through the logic of “an economy of repression and melancholy” where “difference and difficulty must be incorporated for the foundation to hold” (Scandura and Thurston, *America and the Phantom Modern*, 7). As a homogeneous clock time requires the extinction of differences in duration—a city’s time, unified, a factory’s time, standardized—modernism is the praxis of such elimination.

Therefore, modernism began its macabre project of integration at all fronts. In terms of industrialization, assembly lines as the standard model of production were made possible by “new conceptions of the body-as-machine ... binding the corpus of the nation to the corporation as the worker’s body built the machinery of capital” (Scandura and Thurston 9). The slow accumulation and intensification where “money necessarily crystallizes out of the process of exchange,” thereby creating a “universal equivalent” for measuring not only use-values but also labor times by converting them according to exchange value (Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, 53). Here mediator became the arbitrator, and necessity became absolute axiomatic. This axiomatic made possible with capital “linking everyone into an identical system of market valuation and so procuring the reproduction of social life through an objectively grounded system of social bonding” (Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 102). Qualitative differences, which belong inherently to the order of duration, were made impossible by the hegemony of quantitative equivalence. The same process where heterogeneous time was made measurable through homogeneous spatialization reveals itself in the economic realm of modernity.

On the artistic front, the novel art form of cinema was consummated in Hollywood with its trademark technique of montage which transformed otherwise time-consuming story development by compressing “different effects out of different times (old newspapers) and spaces (the use of common objects)” for “a simultaneous effect” that is antithetical to durational unfold of the flow: it is “spatialization of time” (Harvey 21). Moreover, the crystallization of duration in space is most visible in the “modernist phase” of architecture. Whether it is brutalist structures, skyscrapers, or the monumentality of buildings like the Empire State Building and the Eiffel Tower, modernism aspires to communion with the eternal “by freezing time and all its fleeting qualities” (Harvey 21). Such eternity is but an illusion because it is a stillness that betrays the true everlastingness that is only to be found in perpetual motion. Envisioning itself to be a vanguard that conjoins “the ephemeral and the fleeting with the eternal and the immutable” like photography, modernist architecture is in truth “a ruthless break with any or all preceding historical conditions” (Harvey 10, 12).

And of both artistic, architectural, and industrial fronts, America is the paragon of modernism. The Hollywood, New York City, and Ford T-models, all “[duck] the question of origins” because they have “no primitive accumulation of time” and live “in a perpetual present” thanks to their historical and geographical isolation from the rest of the world up to 18th and 19th century, where modernism climbed towards its peak (Baudrillard 76). The final assault of modernism is expressed in Americanization as the great transnational-cultural-historical force of homogenization, where “what was distinctively American had to be celebrated as the essence of Western culture” (Harvey 37).

4. “Postmodernism” as Symptom: [possibly adding more examples and analysis from Harvey and Jameson]

[example of Vaporwave and Arctic Monkeys]

Consider the incongruity conjured by the following image: a Greek bust, gazing skyward, is poised on the checkered floor of pink and black; a picture of a 1980s cityscape at dusk further back constitutes the *mise en scène* of the mysterious expression. This is the art cover of internet artist Macintosh Plus’ most recognized album, *Floral Shoppe*, which contains the song “Lisa Frank 420/Modern Computing.” Deemed as a foundational piece in the establishment of the genre of vaporwave, the song is basically a remix of Diana Ross’ 1984 release “It’s Your Move.” Two major changes can be found in the remix: (1) there is a substantially slowed-down tempo, and (2) a truncation of the original lyrics. Contrasting with the intensely paced rhythm of the original, each note in the remix carries with it a prolonged past. The preceding notes seem to have forgotten their evanescence and dither around the equivocally proceeding present. Additionally, the coherent narrative of questioning the ambiguous affection of the singer’s lover in the original metamorphoses into semantic illegibility as the remix initiates its lyrical part by the refrain, a triple “I don’t...” that immediately vanishes and is replaced by the tune lurking in the background of their utterances--language dissolves in duration, differing from the prominence of the lyrics in the original. Inaugurated by *Floral Shoppe*, the vaporwave aesthetic started to gain an increasing presence online, and over time, it has developed into a pastiche of 1980s media (music and advertisement), Greek sculptures, and popular consumer icons. Blurring the boundaries between motley signs, vaporwave commences a journey into the depths of hauntological asynchronization, with memories intermingled, trespassing durational bounds

[use the song *Ghosts* by the band Japan as the transition point]: Observations of contemporary music culture led Fisher to exclaim that the ability of art creation to “articulate the present” is lost because “there is no present to grasp and articulate any more.”¹¹ What does he mean by this? It is an extension of Fredric Jameson’s notion of “nostalgia mode,” as represented in cultural pastiche. Unlike parody, which retains sympathy for the original, pastiche is a “neutral practice of such mimicry... without the satirical impulse,” which is particular for

11 Fisher, “Ghost of My Life”, 19.

postmodern culture.¹² For example, *The Big Lebowski*, as a parody of noir films, puts the hippie-like persona of “the dude” in contrast with the traditional masculine images carried to excess in detective films, which can be read as a social commentary in response to the Gulf War.¹³ On the other hand, *Star Wars* can be treated as a pastiche because it refurbishes the old cultural narrative of the cowboy (as Han Solo) or sci-fi doomsday box (the Death Star) without any ulterior motives for social critique.¹⁴ Pastiche art does not “reinvent a picture of the past in its lived totality” but reuses the artifacts of culture production to produce objects of consumption, whose success relies on audiences experiencing a feeling of nostalgia.¹⁵ Similarly, music groups like Joy Division and Arctic Monkeys are nestled in an overwhelming sense of nostalgia that is symptomatic of a stagnant culture.

Differing from what Fisher terms “psychological nostalgia,” which relies on a coherent historical sense and is inherently modernist.¹⁶ Even though the narrative order is shuffled in modernist writers like Proust, Joyce, and Faulkner, their reminiscences are still retrospectively established as the past proper. The *mémoire involontaire* illuminates itself by appearing in the present, but it does not formally haunt the narrative. Formal nostalgia, on the other hand, relies on technology to refurbish the past; history haunts it by masking itself as the present. For example, The Weeknd’s “Blinding Light” offers an astounding sample of nostalgia for the 80s with its use of a synthesizer, evoking a haunting presence of the past in the present through technological necromancy. Such regurgitation of cultural templates is essentially postmodern to Fisher because music genres like vaporwave showcase “a consequence of a retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience.”¹⁷

For formal nostalgia, the impossibility to conceive cultural novelty leads to a generation “whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened.”¹⁸ Even the need for protest and hope for revolutionary change cannot escape “the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations, and hopes by capitalist culture.”¹⁹ No rebellious spirit can escape the container of postmodern formal nostalgia, because to rebel requires critiquing or overthrowing the entrenched notions or system, which is an evolutionary process of creation, either in the form of transformation or negation. “Nostalgia mode” liquidates such possibility by mediating and resolving the anticipated urge for revolt in capitalism through

12 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” in *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Rya (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 1761.

13 J.M. Tyree and Ben Walters, “*The Big Lebowski*”(London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 43.

14 Jameson, “Postmodernism”, 1763.

15 *ibid.*

16 Fisher, “Ghost of My Life”, 11.

17 *ibid.*, 11-12.

18 Mark Fisher, “Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?” (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 9.

19 *ibid.*

participation in spectacles of resistance: [It] performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity.”²⁰ The formal repetition of the artistic genre not only infinitely conjures successful cultural templates from the past and refurbishes it with technology into marketable form, but it also opens onto the anticipated emergence and imaginary resolution of resistance. Henceforth, Fisher’s read of hauntology shows itself to be a theoretical symptomization of an unattainable future whose derivative malady is cultural ossification – what Fisher terms as “the slow cancellation of the future.”

5. “Postmodernism” Diagnosis:

Postmodernism, a term that gained traction in the later half of the 20th century and reached its peak in the 1980s, is discontent with modernism’s projects. However, the term “postmodern” is controversial due to its lack of a clear definition even among theorists who label themselves “postmodernists.” While some theorists argued that it is therefore a dialectical reaction to modernism, Jean-François Lyotard argued otherwise. For him, postmodernism should not be interpreted as a separate intellectual and aesthetic movement distinct from modernism, which would fall back on the modernist logic of separation and distinction. Postmodernism is not interested in distinguishing itself from modernism as a theoretical breakthrough, not “modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant” (Lyotard, *What*, 44). Postmodernism understands modernism’s arbitrariness in creating a principle of equivalent exchange, but instead of endorsing such axiomatic, it tries to expose the unrepresentable, the qualitative duration that is omitted by necessity. Therefore, while modernism “allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents,” postmodernism “puts forward the unrepresentable in the presentation itself” and “searches for new presentations, not to enjoy them but to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (Lyotard, *What* 46). The rebellion of post-structuralism against structuralism, the deconstruction of stable forms and metanarratives, and post-colonial study, these disciplines and schools prospered under the banner of postmodernism, and what is recognizable in all of them is a desire to point out the excessive, rupture in a coherent narrative, and, in essence, the heterogeneous quality masked by homogeneous quantity.

Postmodernism thus is an “opening up” of “a vast landscape,” a broadening of the horizon to the point of its disappearance, where “there is no longer any horizon of universality, universalization, or general emancipation” (Lyotard, *Meaning* 47). It does not resemble what modernism and its aesthetic traditions have done, which is a self-elevation on a linear temporality as the “progressive” or “emancipated.” The postmodern mode of engaging critique is an immanent one: it “evokes what it wishes to surpass or suppress” by techniques like pastiche and parody (Hassan 149). It takes modernist avant-garde to the extreme by fully embracing what modernity tried to harness—“the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity” thus achieving a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* (Harvey 44). This is because, by exposing the leaky nature of the great modernism’s theoretical edifice, postmodernism points out the impossibility

20 Fisher, “Capitalist Realism”, 12.

of structures to completely harness the content subsumed under them. If modernism, with its adoption of homogeneous time as the mechanism to “suppress any notion of ‘difference’ which might challenge the dominant model of subjectivity,” postmodernism unearths “the heterogeneous and intermittent” of unanalyzable time to disrupt modernity’s discourse “founded on an idea of time which follows a sequence and rhythm” (Richard 464).

The main criticism of postmodernism usually gathers around the lack of definition and clear contour that such a cluster of loose theoretical speculation has. However, if the task of postmodernism is to point out the existence of an unrepresentable in a system dominated by representation, it is unfair to fault it for not giving a representation of the unrepresentable. Instead of wishing postmodern theory to aspire to the same distinctness and clarity as modernism, it would be more compelling to “accept the fragmentation, the pluralism, and the authenticity of other voices and other worlds” while acknowledging this movement toward quality, by necessity, requires a lessening of the quantitative actuality, which indeed “poses the acute problem of communication and the means of exercising power through command thereof” (Harvey 49). Modernism and postmodernism are therefore in a perpetual tension due to their emphasis on two different understandings of time, but by this tension, they are incapable of total separation: modernism is the necessity to represent the unrepresentable, while postmodernism is the haunting awareness of the leaky nature of such representation.

[need to elaborate on the symptomatic parts, especially in regard to cultural production]

6. The Works of Gilles Deleuze:

[not sure if i should add this part yet, because this is just my proposal, but in short it is a proposal that there is a metaphysical solution to the problem of traumatic modernity and perpetuation of trauma in postmodernity in Deleuze’s work. I think it is better if I do it as a separate project.]

His reading of Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle

How do we reconceive that repetition might be the problem

Projects and Future Directions: