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Popular Culture and the Denigration of the Self

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“Popular Culture and the Denigration of the Self”
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Philosophy “rock star” Slavoj Žižek takes exception to those who smugly proclaim that Western culture has entered a post-ideological age. In such an age, people no longer hold to deep beliefs about religion or history or politics. They do not need Hegel or Jesus Christ, Moses or Marx. They have become more pragmatic creatures who make rational choices based on their self-interest—whether that be economic or psychological, political or sexual. They are freed from ultimately foundationless doctrines such as Christianity or Marxism.

Žižek tells the story of a man whose wife died of cancer rather suddenly. The man dealt remarkably well with her passing. But his friends noticed that whenever he talked about his wife he held a hamster in his hands—his wife’s beloved pet. Months later the hamster died, the man had an emotional breakdown, and he had to be hospitalized for severe depression. In this philosophical parable, the death of the wife is the death of ideologies and the hamster is the fetish that allows people to persevere in the absence of ideologies. So to the post-ideologist, Žižek asks “*where is your hamster—the fetish which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality ‘the way it is’?*” (Žižek, “Afterword,” 252).

I want to argue that it is in popular culture that we find an array of fetishistic objects that people desire in a post-ideological Western culture. From television shows to Barbies, from movies to sports teams, people find a fetish that serves to fill the void left by the absence of religious and political ideology. Despite the therapeutic benefits, however, my claim is that, in a viciously circular manner, popular culture fetishes depend upon and promote a kind of self that is feeble and diminished—a kind of self that we would be wise to avoid.

In order to understand how fetishes work, it is instructive to look at not only Zizek's account, but Karl Marx's as well. Marx describes a commodity as "an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (Marx, 437). Commodities have a mystical or mysterious character to them. Produced by human beings, they take on a life of their own—detached from the hands that make them. They become the locus of social relations, to the extent that the consumers and the producers are only in a relationship through the commodity itself. Marx compares commodities to the gods of the religious world.

In that [religious] world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products

of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx, 447)

Thus, the attachment to or even craving of commodities is fetishism. The commodities that we desire fulfill our needs “of some sort or another.” While some of these needs may be biological, commodity fetishism speaks more to deeper psychological or existential needs such as human relations and meaning. It speaks in particular to those needs that arise in response to traumatic change, such as, today, the fall of ideological structures. These needs are even more powerful than those of biology, and they explain the powerful draw that commodities have on us. This is the focus of the work of someone like Žižek, drawing on the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan as well as Marxist theory.

Žižek makes a distinction between a symptom and a fetish. Take again the case of the death of a loved one:

in the case of a symptom, I “repress” this death, I try not to think about it, but the repressed trauma returns in the symptom; in the case of a fetish, on the contrary, I “rationally” fully accept this death, and yet I cling to the fetish, to some feature that embodies for me the disavowal of this death. In this sense, a fetish can play a very constructive role in allowing us to cope with the harsh reality: fetishists are not dreamers

lost in their private worlds, they are thoroughly
“realists,” able to accept the way things effectively
are—since they have their fetish to which they can
cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality.

(Zizek, *On Belief*, 13-14)

The man whose wife died could repress his sadness and try not to think about her. He could throw himself, for example, into his work—perhaps even in an obsessive manner. Here his repressed mourning shows itself in his symptom, in his obsessive dedication to his job. On the other hand, he might rationally accept the death and talk about it freely—but only with the aid of the fetish. In this case, the hamster helps him to cope with the burden of the reality that he does not repress but that he also cannot accept at face value. As Zizek concludes, “a fetish is the embodiment of the lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth. . . . In this sense, a fetish can play a very constructive role of allowing us to cope with harsh reality” (Zizek, *Universal*, 253).

Zizek’s work abounds with examples of fetishes in Western culture. Money is a good one. He writes that “a bourgeois subject knows very well that there is nothing magic about money, that money is just an object which stands for a set of social relations, but he nevertheless *acts* in real life as if he believed that money is a magical thing” (Zizek, *Universal*, 254-255). Western Buddhism is often a target for Zizek. While practitioners go about their daily business immersed in capitalist endeavors, they can act as if they are detached from it

(Zizek, *Universal*, 254). Thus, they can believe themselves to be free of that system's manipulations and injustices while knowing they are not.¹

The commodities of popular culture are fetishistic as well. While we know that they are mostly trash and meaningless, we act as if they are important and increasingly structure our lives around them—be it the ritualistic viewing of our favorite weekly television show or the obsessive fascination with our celebrities or our potentially unhealthy identification with our chosen sports team.

On the issue of commodity fetishism, Zizek's work is consistent with that of thinkers who came out of the Frankfurt School, itself shaped by the Marxist tradition. Along with his frequent collaborator Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno critiqued the "culture industry" or "mass culture." He writes, "Before the theological caprices of commodities, the consumers become temple slaves. Those who sacrifice themselves nowhere else can do so here, and here they are fully betrayed" (Adorno, 39). They are betrayed because the commodities never satisfy their needs, at least not enough or for long enough. Adorno, in his typically bleak manner, concludes: "Without admitting it they [the consumers of commodities] sense that their lives would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer clung to satisfactions which are none at all" (Adorno, 103). For Zizek, the satisfactions are "none at all" because, like Coca-Cola, they never

¹ Or take democracy. As with any symbolic order (the "Big Other" for Zizek), democracy entails the violent imposition of itself on the population and thus always fails to meet its ideal. Thus, Zizek concludes that "*I know very well* (that the democratic form is just a form spoiled by stains of 'pathological' imbalance), *but just the same* (I act as if democracy were possible)" (Zizek, *Looking Awry*, 168).

really satisfy us. He argues that Coke's "strange taste does not seem to provide any particular satisfaction; it is not directly pleasing and endearing; however, it is precisely as such, as transcending any immediate use-value (unlike water, beer or wine, which definitely do quench our thirst or produce the desired effect of satisfied calm), that Coke functions as the direct embodiment of 'it': of the pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfactions, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption of merchandise" (Zizek, *Fragile*, 22). Whether or not we agree with this negative assessment of Coke, Zizek's point is clear: consumption never ultimately satisfies us. As he concludes, "every satisfaction opens up a gap of 'I want more!'" (Zizek, *Fragile*, 22). But the problem is not simply that we can never consume enough, it is that there is a fundamental lack in all consumption. It is not that I cannot drink enough Cokes. Whether I drink 10 or 10,000, my consumption of each one is an experience of lack—of the failure of the commodity to satisfy my real need.²

So what can we take from Marx and Zizek? First, from Marx we must recognize that fetishes (in this case in regard to commodities) represent or embody social relations, but in an alienated way. We are not directly in relationships with others, for these relationships only are mediated through commodities. And from Zizek we see that fetishes help us to cope with a reality that we do not repress, but with which we only can cope by virtue of the fetish.

² This "real need" is a consequence of what Zizek, borrowing from Lacan, calls the "Real." This "Real" is the untouchable and unknowable void—like a black hole in space—around which our psychic life revolves. Like a black hole, we cannot "see" the Real, but only witness its effects.

So if fetishes are a sign of alienation from others, from social relations; and they are a sign of alienation from reality, because we fundamentally cannot cope with reality directly but only through fetishistic mediation; and if popular culture can be seen as an array of fetishistic objects and phenomena; then popular culture in the end is dependent on a socially-isolated and psychologically-impaired self for its success *and* in its standard mode of operation popular culture promotes such a self. Stated another and shorter way, popular culture depends upon and promotes the postmodern self.

This is the kind of self Alasdair MacIntyre describes and criticizes. Throughout much of his career, but particularly in his work *After Virtue*, first published in 1981, MacIntyre makes a compelling argument that moral life is not a matter of rational assent to a set of transcendental philosophical or logical rules of conduct. Instead, moral life is grounded in communities that have a certain history and that are bound to a certain tradition or traditions that provide the justification for the moral life lived in those communities. This does not mean that there is no place for ethical reflection, but that community, history, and tradition precede that reflection and only on the foundation of that community, history, and tradition will the judgments and the actions from that reflection be justified. The broader criticism here is of the stereotypical, liberal rational being or postmodern self. The broader criticism is of the self defined by its rational capabilities rather than by the intricate web of relationships that form a substantive understanding of the self—a web that includes other selves in the

community, the history of that community, and the tradition that provides myths, legends, rituals and so much more that explain what it means to be in this intricate web. The broader criticism is of what I will call the “naked self.”

MacIntyre’s project is both descriptive and prescriptive. He is describing the nature of the self. He also is describing what he takes to be changes in our understanding of the self, changes that can be traced philosophically back to Kant’s transcendental arguments of the 18th century but that have had a broader and more pervasive impact among 20th century liberal democracies in the West—democracies that fundamentally presuppose the naked self. But MacIntyre is also prescribing a remedy to what he takes to be a contemporary social disease, and his remedy is to reinvigorate our traditions (his tradition of choice is Catholicism, though other traditions might be equally worthwhile) as sites where people can once again be whole selves (or, one might say, “clothed selves”).³

Of course, there are some advantages to the naked self—especially in a pluralistic society. If we are all clothed selves, divided into separate communities, histories, and traditions, how can we form one society or one nation? Won’t these divisions simply lead to conflict? Haven’t they done so throughout human history? Do we really want a bunch of conflicting moral

³ Hermeneutically speaking, there are no purely naked selves. We always already are caught up in community, history, and tradition. Here MacIntyre is consistent with a significant strand of 20th century philosophy. In particular I am thinking of the kind of self described by Martin Heidegger’s notion of our “thrownness” or Hans-Georg Gadamer’s idea of the “effective history” and the key role of “tradition” or even Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of the “narrative self.” Like MacIntyre, such philosophers reject the naked self of postmodern liberal democracies—the kind of self we are left with in a post-ideological age.

codes instead of one morality to which we can all rationally assent? MacIntyre is aware of these problems. But, for MacIntyre, the costs of the naked self (moral ambiguity, anxiety concerning life's purposes, loss of meaning, etc.) far outweigh the advantages.

MacIntyre's analysis can be applied to the self of popular culture. Popular culture treats the self not as grounded in a rich tradition that provides meaning and purpose, but as groundless—capable of being swayed and manipulated to consume this product or that form of entertainment. The popular culture self is conceived as one that has certain desires or cravings that are not bound to a community, history, or tradition.⁴ We come into the world as naked (literally and figuratively) individual consumers and we die that way.⁵

⁴ As a colleague has pointed out to me, a particularly devilish problem for MacIntyre is that our traditions already have been mediated or re-figured through popular culture. In this sense, not only are we "always already" within community, history, and tradition, we "always already" are within those *through* popular culture. Direct access to them is impossible.

⁵ The consumer self that is stripped of connections with community, tradition, and history is infinitely pliable and manipulated by producers of commodities and culture. And as citizens come to see themselves primarily as consumers (even if only unconsciously), they increasing put their freedom at risk in light of the manipulation of the popular culture industry. Even worse, citizens increasingly recognize the ways in which they are manipulated yet willingly cede their freedom in this regard. Adorno argues that the "dream industry [culture industry] does not so much fabricate the dreams of the customers as introduce the dreams of the suppliers among the people" (Adorno, 93). This is a powerful critique, but its effect is minimal because nobody seems to care that their dreams (read "wants" or "desires") are not their own but are the dreams of commodity producers. As Adorno affirms, "The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object" (Adorno, 99). It is in this sense that Adorno argues that the culture industry is not a consequence of human desires, it does not conform itself to the wants of the consumer, rather it conforms the consumer to itself. Adorno concludes that "the culture industry is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims" (185). Jean Baudrillard puts forth a similar claim. "It has never been so clear that the content—here, culture, elsewhere, information or commodities—is nothing but the phantom support for the operation of the medium itself," he argues, "whose function is always to induce mass, to produce a homogeneous human and mental flux" (Baudrillard, 67). The consequences for the individual are grave. Popular culture creates a world of simulacra and simulations that prevents us from experiencing any real meaning in events or relationships. Thus,

The naked selves of American culture are easy pickings for businesses and corporations that provide consumer services and goods. The strategy of “market segmentation” both draws upon individual preference and further isolates individuals from what we might call their “natural” communities—those based on neighborhood geography, school districts, etc. On the one hand, companies utilizing market segmentation draw upon similarities within a particular group and offer products to its specific needs or wants. On the other hand, however, such a strategy accentuates dividing lines among the population, whether along the lines of race, age, class, ethnicity, or more. It also cuts across “natural” communities, appealing to consumers from one end of the country to the other. As Lizabeth Cohen concludes in her book *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, market segmentation strengthened “the boundaries between social groups, it contributed to a more fragmented America” (Cohen, 331).

“events no longer have meaning: it is not that they are insignificant in themselves, it is that they are preceded by the model, with which their processes only coincided” (Baudrillard, 56). Baudrillard also warns of a critical inversion in which we become the objects of the commodities rather than the commodities being our objects. He writes:

people go there [the mall or “hypermarket”] to find and to select objects-responses to all the questions they may ask themselves; or, rather, they *themselves* come *in response* to the functional and directed question that the objects constitute. The objects are no longer commodities: they are no longer even signs whose meaning and message one could decipher and appropriate for oneself, they are *tests*, they are the ones that interrogate us, and we are summoned to answer them, and the answer is included in the question. Thus all the messages in the media function in a similar fashion: neither information nor communication, but referendum, perpetual test, circular response, verification of the code. (Baudrillard, 75)

One might imagine that market segmentation at least leads to distinct consumer communities. And we might conclude that some community is better than none. Certainly there are those in the Harley-Davidson community or the Star Trek (Trekkers) community, but these are more exceptions than the rule. Such communities entail a kind of lifestyle that accompanies the consumer product in a way that most consumer products do not (though certainly advertisers, whether for the Gap or Coca-Cola, try to convince us that their products are lifestyle choices). And I would go further. By appealing to individual needs or wants and emphasizing consumer choice, market segmentation contributes to the prevalence of naked selves. You join your consumer community and remain with it as long as it brings you enjoyment and makes you feel good. When it no longer does that, you move on to another consumer product and join a new community. This mentality translates poorly to our natural communities of neighborhoods, school districts, and towns—places where we need to be able to work with one another to resolve conflicts and figure out solutions to local problems, where conflicts and problems can appear intractable and our continued efforts depend on our acting as citizens and not consumers. No wonder we increasingly find ourselves shut up in our homes with curtains drawn, our windows to the world and each other restricted to computer monitors and television screens. For his part, Zizek describes us as monads. He asks, “Are we not more and more monads with no direct windows onto reality, interacting alone with the PC screen, encountering only the virtual

simulacra, and yet immersed more than ever in the global network, synchronously communicating with the entire globe?" (Zizek, *On Belief*, 26).⁶

Many scholars argue that popular culture is a creator of community rather than a hindrance to it. Take the example of Trekkers, as pop culture guru Henry Jenkins has done. Is this a genuine community, like those we might associate with towns, churches, or civic organizations? Businesses and corporations, through market segmentation, bring very different people together into communities revolving around consumer products. But these communities have identity only to the degree that individuals purchase and enjoy those products. Any individual can move in or out of that community based on personal preference and financial resources. Such communities do not tackle local problems or generate long-lasting commitments to the community. Remember, commodities are only mediators of social relationships. The commodities of popular culture ultimately obfuscate these relationships. Thus, the genuine community that can arise from social relationships is missing in popular culture. Defining community or distinguishing between kinds of communities, however, is difficult. I think this is reflected in one of Jenkins' most influential essays, "*Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching*." In the essay he slips from using scare quotes around the word community to not using scare

⁶ Or, as Guy Debord concludes, "Spectators [or we can say, consumers] are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very centre that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only *in their separateness*" (Debord, 16).

quotes. I think this suggests his own ambivalence about these consumer communities and the naked selves of which they are constituted.⁷

As I have suggested the proliferation of naked selves described in this paper, the popular culture selves, poses some negative consequences for social and political life. The consumer of popular culture is an isolated individual. There is nothing that binds the consumer with his or her fellow citizens other than the act of consumption. There are no common traditions or codes of conduct. Of course, many consumers share a particular product of popular culture in common. Harley Davidson motorcycle owners form a community of sorts, as do (we might suppose) Starbucks coffee drinkers or fans of the television series *Lost*. But even here we fail to reach any level of political critical mass. We do not have political community. (Again, I suspect there are exceptions that prove the rule.) We have groupings as a consequence of market segmentation. And as Cohen notes, the market segmentation of consumer culture has long since made its way into the political arena. In other words, not only are consumers

⁷ I would argue that we need to distinguish at least three types of consumer-based communities associated with popular culture. Product-centered communities revolve around specific consumer commodities, such as people who wear clothing from the Gap or choose Mac versus PC. Lifestyle-centered communities involve a commodity, but include particular behaviors and attitudes that shape a person's life. For example, those people who own a Harley-Davidson are not just owning a motorcycle but choosing a particular lifestyle. Finally, there are religio-locale-centered-communities. An example of this type of community is a college football community, and I am thinking particularly of those in the American South. Such communities, while certainly within popular culture and sharing some characteristics with the other types, are different from product-centered or lifestyle-centered communities. In particular they are different because they have a sense of place (a locale) and function in religious or pseudo-religious ways. As a consequence, they achieve a greater sense of community and thus become distinct from other consumer-based communities (though threatened by the same factors that function perniciously in those other types).

divided through market segmentation, but citizens are divided as well—into liberals and conservatives, the religious and non-religious, gay rights advocates and their opponents, and, of course, Pro-Choices and Pro-Lifers. In such a public square, politicians rarely focus on the common good. They focus on the *goods* of constituencies instead.⁸ Cohen concludes that “just as segmented buyers of goods seek the best match for their distinctive tastes and desires with what is available in the commercial marketplace, so segmented citizens have similarly come to expect the political marketplace—consisting of candidates, government agencies, and PACs—to respond to their needs and interests narrowly construed” (Cohen, 343). In short, citizens—full citizens, clothed in the familiarity of community, history, and tradition—have been turned into naked consumers.

The ways that popular culture exploits and encourages naked selves is pretty depressing.⁹ This sense of foreboding gets worse when we begin to consider the social and political consequences. One might wonder if there is any hope for our future. Adorno perhaps foresaw this predicament when he wrote:

⁸ Cohen observes that rather than “try to convince voters of some common good, as Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower all struggled to do—from FDR’s Four Freedoms to Ike’s prime-time ‘Eisenhower Answers America’—more recent presidential candidates, as well as many running for lower office, at best construct a composite vision out of the specialized interests of their distinct constituencies, and at worst avoid discussing any common good at all” (Cohen, 342).

⁹ Admittedly, one’s community, history, and tradition can be limiting if not downright oppressive—especially if you are, for example, homosexual or bisexual. In this sense, “clothedness” can be a psychologically harmful experience and it would be much better to be naked. But I do not think this needs to be a stark either/or choice—either the comfortable (for the majority) “clothedness” of community, history, and tradition that leads to the marginalization or even persecution of minorities or the liberating “nakedness” represented in (among other places) popular culture.

The neon signs which hang over our cities and
outshine the natural light of the night with their own
are comets presaging the natural disaster of society,
its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky.
They are controlled from earth. It depends upon
human beings themselves whether they will
extinguish these lights and awake from a nightmare
which only threatens to become actual as long as men
believe in it. (Adorno, 96)¹⁰

If this “nightmare” can be avoided or, in a more dire sense, if we can wake up from the “nightmare” we already have begun dreaming, it is going to take a re-orientation of our perspective to our popular culture. It is going to take a renewed affirmation of the “fully clothed” self—the self intricately bound in a web of community, history, and tradition.

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¹⁰ Cohen writes: “As the United States becomes an increasingly multicultural nation, it is more important than ever that social groups not become competing, self-interested segments, or self-contained, oblivious islands. Only with concerted effort can we transcend these pressures to fragment and become a nation diverse but still unified around a common national purpose that is built on something other than war” (Cohen, 408).

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