

“Rise of the Resistance” and the Demise of Social Being: The Autolysis of Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction

What is the task of social theory in the 21st century? What critical questions must theory engage, and which categories could it build on in order to apprehend its object in the historical present? How can social theory remain adequate for its time?¹

The questions are not rhetorical. They express the concern that the form of collective life that has become fully manifest in the 21st century necessitates a radical rethinking of the categories that hitherto informed social theory. Adequate analyses of this new form of social reality and discerning its transformations require categories beyond that which could be provided through paradigms of subjectivity that engage capitalist modernity from the standpoint of discursive, rational, and cognitive potentialities of the subject.² It is now imperative to ask whether category of subjectivity and the normative notions that determine subjectivity in its individual form, namely autonomy, freedom, and reason—the conceptions of subjectivity that constitute the normative grounding of modernity—are adequate categories to apprehend the historical present. It is the premise of this paper that social theory can remain adequate to its time only if it can comprehend collective life through categories apprehended in their historicity. This paper is intended as a contribution to such undertaking, albeit with a limited scope.³ It argues for critical ontology as a form of social theory that builds on Hegel's ontological account of categories and Durkheim's social theory that reinterprets Hegel's account in social-theoretical terms.

Elsewhere, I argued that Durkheim's social theory, both as a paradigm of society as well as in terms of its central concepts, is, in fact, a social-theoretical re-articulation of Hegel's philosophy, and as such, Durkheim's sociology culminates in social ontology as a form of social theory (Kadakal, 2021). For the purposes of this paper, I will build on one key category, which has central analytical importance in Durkheim's ontological account of collective life, namely representations (*Vorstellung*). Both in Hegel and Durkheim, representations serve to apprehend categories of social life as well as forms of consciousness mediated through them in their ontological becoming and transformation. Recovering this ontological account is pivotal for apprehending the historical present and its categories, more specifically, for apprehending the contemporary form of subjectivity as a form of determinate being.

In what follows, I will first draw on a recent product from the culture industry, namely The Disneyland theme-park ride called "Rise of the Resistance" based on the sci-fi movie *Star Wars*, which, rather than being merely an anecdote in popular culture, involves a representation that has a significant illustrative value for apprehending contemporary form of subjectivity. (I) In order to clarify how an analysis of this artifact of culture industry allows for apprehending subjectivity as a category, in the second part of the paper, I will delineate the notion of representation as a central element of critical ontology as a form of social theory by building on Hegel and Durkheim. (II) Against this backdrop of illustrative and conceptual expositions of representations, in the third part of the paper, I will assert how a critical ontology that builds on representations reveals the onto-genetic transformation of the subject and its autolysis in the historical present. (III)

With autolysis, I denote the obliteration of subjectivity both as a determinate being and as a category of collective life, a form of negation that comes into being as the determinate outcome of the subject's own actuality, the outcome of the subject's realization in the commodity form that had taken on the form of collective life. When apprehended through representations, I argue, such autolysis, which is experienced as an entertainment, reveals itself as the mark of a new form of collective life, one that involves radical transition in categories of collective life, and hence necessitates equally radical scrutiny of categories hitherto obtained in social theory.

The fundamental transformations in subjectivity in relation to collective life have been the main concern of penetrating and insightful analyses over the past decades.⁴ Baudrillard's analysis, most significantly, delineates the contemporary culture as "the era of simulation," that is, the reproduction of reality without an original, without any referentials to the real or to truth, as "hyperreal." (Baudrillard, 1994, pp.1-3). In Baudrillard's assessment, in the era of simulation, the distinction and distance between the real and the imaginary is obliterated, or to put it more precisely, "reabsorbed on behalf of the model" (Baudrillard, 1994, p.121). This universe of simulation, of the hyperreal, is "dull and flat, without exteriority," a form of culture that eliminates the potential and the capacity for an 'ideal' or a critique on the part of the subject (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 121-122). For Baudrillard, the culture of postmodernity marks the revolution of the twentieth century: a generation of a world that is neither real nor fictional, a world defined by a lack of such a distinction, a world "without depth" (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 121-125). The questions of depthlessness, flatness as a cultural form, and the postmodern culture as the culture of the image or the simulacrum were also the central concerns of Jameson's seminal essay (Jameson, 1984). For Jameson, postmodern culture is defined by what he refers to as "the waning of affect" (Jameson, 1984, p. 61); that is, rather than the "vanishing of all feeling and emotion," what we observe in postmodern culture is the disappearance, within the subject, of the very distinction between inside and outside, between an experience of affect, an inward emotion, and its outward communication and externalization. As the cultural logic of advanced capitalism, this postmodern culture denotes a "mutation" both in the "object world," which has become a simulacra, as well as in the "disposition of the subject" (Jameson, 1984, pp. 60-62). As Jameson puts it, as to be observed in the realm of aesthetic expression, postmodern culture constitutes "a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm" (Jameson, 1984, p. 65).

The following analysis differs from these main paradigms in its analytical and conceptual framework. In what follows, I argue that contemporary culture, insightfully depicted as hyperreal, as a

“world without a depth” (Baudrillard) or as “waning of affect” (Jameson) is in fact a world with a specific content, one that still holds distinctions. Such content needs to be apprehended not in the idiom of its extension, as its “depth,” as its linearity, but rather dialectically, as a matter of mediations as its essence—mediations through which the content produces and reproduces itself and its categories in their constant transformation and change. Put differently; I assert that the flatness of the universe of simulation, a world with “stylistic and discursive heterogeneity” but “without a norm,” only discloses a historically specific outcome of mediations in collective life, namely a one-sided negation of the category of subjectivity as I will depict later. Although such historically specific outcomes of mediations appear to be impossible to surmount from the side of the subjectivity, which is itself a determinate being, or such outcome might take the form of—as Baudrillard puts it—an “insuperable” simulation (p. 125), nevertheless, the content and its distinctions, that is, collective life and its categories, are not an indeterminate totality. The flat universe of simulation, in other words, needs to be apprehended in terms of determinate transformations in the categories of collective life. More specifically, when apprehended as representation (*Vorstellung*), simulation, or the lack of distinction between the real and the imaginary in fact discloses a truth. Such truth inheres not in affirmation of simulacrum but in its critical apprehension as a representation of what the “world without a depth” and the lack of capacity for an “ideal” or critique entail on the side of subjectivity (cf. Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 121-123). By the same token, the “waning of affect” and the “fundamental mutation” in subjectivity, as Jameson puts it in relation to postmodern culture (Jameson, 1984, p. 60), need to be apprehended as manifestations of fundamental transformations in the categories of collective life—transformations that are ontological through and through. That is to say, if one observes in the artistic expressions in late capitalism the disappearance of the experience of alienation and alienated forms of sociality such as anomie, isolation, and fragmented sense of self and social life, this is because what Jameson refers to as the “parable of the transformation” (Jameson, 1984, p. 61) in fact extends beyond the objects and subjects of postmodern art: It involves subjectivity itself as a historically specific category.

Social theory, adequate to its time, must apprehend categories in its mediation and assess the truth in its historicity. For a social theory adequate to its task, such truth is not a “metaphysical baggage” as postmodernism sees it (Jameson, 1984, p. 61) but rather is its vantage point. While the poststructuralist critique might very well be a symptom of the postmodernist culture, as Jameson insightfully puts it, nevertheless, the fact that various “depth models” (e.g., hermeneutic, Freudian, existentialist) (see Jameson, 1984, p. 62) and their normative implications had been repudiated by the postmodernist critique evinces the fact that adequate social theory ought to comprehend its own categories and their normative implications in their historicity. It is in that sense that the postmodern critique should be taken very seriously—not as an affirmation of the radical rejection of truth, but rather as forms of thought that compel social theory to radically question the validity of its categories, including the category of subjectivity, and investigate into their ontological grounding and scrutinize their normative implications. As I will argue below, what the Disneyland ride and its simulations bring forth through their content and their associated ideas and ideals are neither external nor alien to the form of subjectivity defining the historical present. What the ride reproduces in the form of a representation is in fact very much real, actual, and affirmative within the subject—real and actual, and hence, the representation could in fact recreate it as a simulation, and affirmative because as a representation it denotes a form of subjectivity who is capable of living this simulated experience as a form of entertainment. The fact that such content has become a source of amusement and an enjoyable experience evinces a form of subjectivity both as a category and as a determinate being. Social theory adequate to its time must critically apprehend such truth—subjectivity in its determinations, in its ontological transformation.

Since the eighteenth century, subjectivity in its individual form has been central to modernity’s self-understanding. As a category and representation, it expressed the notions of autonomy, freedom, and reason as idealizations that modern society had put forward for itself. Social theory adequate to its time, however, must apprehend categories, including categories of subjectivity in their historicity, as forms of determinate beings. The following account is one such attempt for social theory to go beyond the eighteenth-century forms of thought, apprehend categories and their normative intimations critically

in their historically determined ontology, and inquire whether they are adequate to the truth with which they were once identified.

“Rise of The Resistance”

Recently, the Disney Company introduced in its theme-parks an amusement ride called the “Rise of the Resistance.” The ride is based on the popular and commercially immensely successful movie franchise *The Star Wars*. It incorporates the characters, images, scenes and prompts from the movie sequels, and utilizes advanced technology in automation, imaging, and visual effects in order to create a simulation of various scenes depicted in the movie sequels.⁵ The narrative elements of the ride are devised to have the customers—referred to as “park guests” by Disney—participate in the ride in the form of a role-play through a sequence of scenes in the storyline, resulting in—as Disney promotes it—“one of the most advanced and immersive experiences ever undertaken by Walt Disney Imagineering.” The ride starts in a hall set up to simulate a military post—a frequent scene in the movie sequels—on a fictional planet. The guests play the part of “new recruits” for the “Resistance” fighters in a war against what is called the “First Order,” and they are to be transported to a secret base to join fellow members of the Resistance. During transport, the spacecraft that carries the new recruits is intercepted by the forces of the “First Order,” whose “military officers” board the vessel. The guests are told they are being detained and are ordered to disembark for interrogation.



Figure 1. Disneyland cast members dressed as a member of the First Order, ordering guests to disembark for interrogation. “Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge - Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance” by Jeremy Thompson is licensed under CC BY 2.0

As the guests (who are now “detainees,”) exit the vessel and step into a large hangar of the First Order Star Destroyer, they encounter a sight that strikes an immediate awe: rows of clone soldiers (the Stormtroopers) standing in ready formation, staring directly at the “detainees.” The scene projects an immediate sense of domination by massive military power.

Under the gaze of the Stormtroopers, detainees are then sent to an adjacent hall for “processing.” The “processing” scene takes place in a setting that simulates a hallway on a military spaceship, and it consists of interactions where Disney employees, costumed in uniforms, play the role of the “First Order military officers” in charge of the “processing.”



Figure 2. Stormtroopers on stage. "Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge - Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance" by Jeremy Thompson is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)



Figure 3. Stormtroopers on stage. "Inside the "Rise of the Resistance." Truly an amazing experience. Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge - Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance" by Peter Lee is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

The military mise-en-scène, the script, the enactment, and various commands and instructions delivered by the “officers” during the “processing” are clearly designed to emulate power and domination. The “officers” order the “detainees” to line up against the wall on marked and color-coded spots. The pre-scripted interaction involves disparaging and disdainful intonations, often mixed with sarcasm.



Figure 4. Guests line up in the hallway awaiting "processing" and "interrogation." "Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge - Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance" by Jeremy Thompson is licensed under CC BY 2.0

The "detainees" are given orders that mimic domination and slight creatively delivered by the Disneyland employees enacting the scene: "Stand on the marked line!" "Pay attention and remember the color code you are assigned to!" "No point in denying your involvement with the resistance!" "You will be interrogated!" "It will be painful!" "You will be hearing each other's screams." After the "processing" scene, the guests, who are now "prisoners," are moved to a room that simulates a small prison cell. Two characters from the movie sequels ("General Hux" of the "First Order" and a figure known as "Kyl Ren") appear on the scene (both simulations), standing high above the cell and chiding the "prisoners" down below behind the bars. The "prisoners" are told that the information—the location of the secret base—will be extracted from them.



Figure 5. Disneyland cast members pose as officers of the First Order. "Rise of the Resistance. Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge, Disney's Hollywood Studios by Kelly Verdeck is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0

When the military leaders leave the scene, and the prisoners await their interrogation and torture, the resistance fighters come to help the prisoners break free and escape the First Order spaceship. The ride ends with a motion ride and a flight simulation. The guests exit through the gift shop, where they can purchase theme-based merchandise, including the First Order uniforms, and in the park interact with the characters from the ride.



Figure 6. The First Order uniforms are for sale at the park gift shop. Photo by Efford.

While "Rise of Resistance" appears to be simply a visually attractive spectacle with "high-tech automation" based on a theme from a highly popular science fiction title, as a form of entertainment, its significance extends beyond the genre, the theme, and the specific features of the technology employed. Rather than being simply an anecdote of popular culture, the Disneyland ride offers crucial illustrative value. What allows the ride—the experience it purports to provide—to be a form of entertainment, that is to say, what makes a simulation of a fiction to be enjoyable make-believe, is the fact that such an experience involves a form of representation.⁶ The fundamental element of this representation consists in the form of subjectivity it denotes. More specifically, as a representation it carries the mark of a subjectivity in its ontological transformation.



Figure 7. The guests interact with characters from the ride. "Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge (Disneyland)" by geoff dude is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

In order to elucidate this representation and its significance for the form of subjectivity it intimates, I will offer next a brief account of *representation* as a form of thought as identified by Hegel and its social-theoretical re-articulation by Durkheim. For the purposes of my argument, my reinterpretation of Hegel and Durkheim will be limited to expounding representations from the standpoint of the critical ontology of categories, including the category of subjectivity in its individual form. In this account, categories are to be apprehended both as thought determinations, as well as concretely as forms of beings that unfold as history—an account of categories radically different than the way they are conceived by paradigms of subjectivity and its underlying conception of truth. Only after this brief account of representations and categories will I be able to expound next on what the Disneyland amusement ride involves as a form of representation and on the implications of the experience it purports to reproduce in the form of entertainment. As I will argue, this representation takes and fixes upon as its object a theme from a popular culture as it brings into relief a historical moment of subjectivity as a determinate being in its ontological transformation.

Representations

From the standpoint of critical ontology as a form of social theory, Hegel's account of categories stands distinctly apart from the subjective idealism of the late eighteenth century. In subjective idealism, as to be found in Kant's First Critique, thought is reduced to 'understanding,' and the latter itself is conceived, in turn, through antinomies that build on abstract oppositions. This subjective-idealist explanation of categories ends in a form of thought that cannot reach beyond those thought determinations that give rise to the conceived antinomy itself in the first place. In Hegel's philosophical account of categories, i.e., in his *Science of Logic*, in contrast, we find categories apprehended in their mediation, in a movement of thought through which categories come into being and exist as absolutely distinct yet equally inseparable from each other. This is a movement of thought where each category immediately disappears in its opposite: "Being" immediately disappears in its other, "Nothing"; their truth consists in their "Becoming." In *the Science of Logic*, accordingly, the truth of being is to be sought in its coming into being as a determinate being and in its determinations.⁷

In the development of social theory, Hegel's account of categories has been appropriated in two main forms, which led to two forms of ontology as a form of social theory. The first is Lukács' materialist ontology, which reconstructs Hegel's idealist ontology and his account of categories by building on praxis, labor, and mediation. The second is Durkheim's sociological paradigm—which is deeply misunderstood in American sociology—that re-articulates Hegel's account of categories in social-theoretical terms.⁸ Especially Durkheim's paradigm of society in the *Elementary Forms* expands directly on Hegel's notion of *representations* as a form of thought, re-articulated to reveal the relationship between categories and collective life. We can briefly outline this progress from Hegel to Durkheim from the standpoint of social theory in order to delineate how representations become critical to apprehending categories both as thought determinations as well as in their coming into being concretely in collective life.

Representations as a Form of Universality of Thought

If Hegel's *Science of Logic* is an account of this movement of thought as an account of categories, his lectures on the *Philosophy of Religion* are an account of the movement of thought in the form of religious consciousness where representations hold a vital role. This ontological grounding of religious consciousness through an account of representations is central to Durkheim's central paradigm in *Elementary Forms*. In broadest terms, in Hegel's usage, representation (*Vorstellung*) captures the mediated nature of thought as well as the subjective and objective moments of consciousness in this mediation.⁹ More specifically, representation is a form of thought—to the extent if one could separate the two for Hegel—through which an object, in its essence, becomes present before the mind and where the mind takes the form of consciousness of the object. For Hegel, this is a moment of consciousness

where the representation of an object and the manifestation of this representation are freed from their immediacy. In religious consciousness, accordingly, consciousness and its object, in their initial development, are differentiated out of totality as a part of the movement of consciousness where the latter differentiates the object as 'other.' Religious representation [*Vorstellung*] is the moment of their "reconciliation" —a moment that marks consciousness and its object, as Hegel puts it, "achieving their unity again in self-consciousness." What we refer to as 'faith' in religion is, in fact, precisely the "immediate form" that this unity takes. Be it derived from the "inner life" or from external phenomena, for Hegel representation indicates an "immediate relation" of certainty, that is, the moment of immediacy of the content and the self. For Hegel, the whole sphere of manifestations—the "religious spirit" as Hegel calls it— come into being as religious representations attain more and more content through such moments of 'reconciliation' of consciousness and its object as an immediate form of unity and certainty. The religious spirit, in other words, consists of representations and expresses the movement of consciousness toward freedom.

It is important to note that, in this movement of consciousness, a representation is not an abstraction. Nor the categories that come into being in this movement are to be apprehended as abstractions in the sense that subjective Idealism would conceive categories. The form of consciousness involved in representations has an objective content, which, for Hegel, can only exist, like all content of consciousness, through a mode. That is to say, representations, in their content, are not simply subjective, nor are they "merely mine" as in, for instance, dreams, where, as Hegel puts it "I exist as consciousness, I have objects in my mind, but they have no existence." The content of representations exist independently, and yet, in their independent existence, they are inseparable from consciousness. Representations consist of this very content and the mode of form of consciousness. As Hegel puts it, in representations, there are "...two points bound up togethercontent is at once independent and at the same time inseparable from me; that is, it is mine, and yet it is just as much not mine." Representations, in other words, are a determinate form of thought in the form of universality. They have an independent content. Yet, they are inseparable from self-consciousness. This account of representations as a determinate form of thought with a form of universality finds its social-theoretical articulation in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms*.

Categories as Representations

Durkheim's sociological paradigm in the *Elementary Forms* is essentially ontological. As is the case with Durkheim's overall sociological paradigm and its central theoretical conceptualizations (e.g., collective representations, organic and mechanical solidarity, social facts), Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* builds on and re-interprets Hegel's idealist ontology in social-theoretical terms. This sociological paradigm consists of demonstrating the onto-genetic relationship between categories as representations and the structure and mode of collective life that become manifest through them. More specifically, the central argument of the *Elementary Forms* synthesizes Hegel's account of categories in the *Science of Logic* and delineation of the development of religious consciousness in lectures on the *Philosophy of Religion* to assert that representations constitute the foundation of "all spheres" of belief and forms of knowledge, including scientific knowledge and categories of understanding. By building on studies of elemental social forms, Durkheim shows that categories in their content and mode as representations are anchored in and express collective life as a form of being and as reality sui- generis.

For Durkheim, the anthropological studies on elemental social forms offer evidence for this relationship between categories as representations and collective life. Representations in religious rites and rituals, accordingly, appear as the moments of collective life where the latter becomes conscious of itself *in* and *through* representations and where representations, by the very process, acquire some of the properties of objects that they are fixed upon. The analysis of representations, in effect, unveils the form of consciousness that comes into being through them. The categorical distinctions such as sacred and profane, as to be found in the elemental social forms, are the instances of representations: They

are classifications that religions introduce into the collective life, or, to put more precisely, the moments where collective life brings forward and represents itself to itself through religious classifications. Equally important, since representations come into being concretely and effectively in the mode of rites and rituals as well as in collective beliefs and ideals formed around classifications, they articulate modes of actions and forms of thought. The ontological significance of representations consists in the fact that they are the embodiment of how collective life penetrates the consciousness of its members and constitutes them in its own image, and in doing so, creates and recreates itself as such. In such ontology, religious classifications are only a special case of collective representations—although a foundational one in the elemental forms of collective life. Similarly, the fundamental categories of understanding (e.g., time, space, causality, etc.) are, in fact, classifications whose origin is not the nature of things but the nature of collective life itself. They are neither a-priori nor innate to the human mind. Categories are founded in collective life and express the processes by means of which collective life achieves a mode of moral and intellectual framework as a condition of its own possibility. Categories, accordingly, are collective representations.¹⁰ They have an objective existence with a form of universality: They take the actual framework of society “as their own.”¹¹ Their content expresses reality—the real being of things, that is, the objective reality of society as a form of being. In fact, not only are categories as representations modeled on collective life and express how collective life apprehends itself, but they also are actual in the sense that they exist objectively, and as such, they are the elements of the processes of social being, its development, and change.

In both Hegel and Durkheim's respective ontological accounts, categories as representations involve a mediated form of consciousness.¹² This is an account of how collective life, which is a form of determined being, apprehends itself by means of categories and distinctions it brings into being as representations. The latter crystallize in and acquire the characteristics of the symbolic, moral, and rational universe—elements that they employ in its process.¹³ As such, representations contain the imprints of social life as their foundation, and they reveal the forms of thought through which collective life becomes conscious of itself. Representations, in other words, become a form of mediation.

Apprehending representations as mediated forms of consciousness, however, is not an affirmation of the truth of representation —i.e., the truth of the symbolic object of representation or the content of categories and systems classifications. From the standpoint of critical ontology as a form of social theory, truth exists not as representations but *in* representations, in the processes of mediation that bring them into being, and in their transition and change, in their constant processes of becoming. As such, representations are to be apprehended critically, as a form of mediation, as the elements of concrete processes of collective life that bring them into being as such. The task of theory, then, is to attain what is beyond representation and uncover the actual reality it expresses—a reality whose experience imparts representation and truth, albeit in a mediated form. Social theory adequate to its time can critically apprehend collective life and its categories, including the category of subjectivity, as determinate beings in their historicity through an analysis of the mediated nature of representations.

Autolysis of the Subject

What is crucial to recognize with the Disneyland ride is not simply the fact that what it purports to simulate has no underlying reality—that is, it is hyperreal, its “generation by models of a real without origin or reality”—but rather that it has, as its essence, a representation. This representation, notwithstanding the fictional nature of the object it fixes upon (The Star Wars), carries the visible imprints of truth. Such truth pertains to the experience of the subject. More specifically, as a representation, it denotes a form of subjectivity as a category and as a determinate being with normative implications in the historical present: As a representation, it denotes a form of subjectivity who is being entertained, who can have an “immersive experience” through the form of enactments and simulations of conditions derived from the phenomenon and an ideology of total domination of the subject. If simulations of the experience of detainment, interrogation, and imprisonment can become a form of entertainment, a form of recreation



Figure 8. Disneyland theme park. Photograph by James Baram, Polygon, and Vox Media, LLC. This photograph is not available for licensing via Creative Commons. Please contact the copyright owner (Vox Media, LLC) for licensing inquiries.



Figure 9. Ferguson, Missouri, 2014. [AP] License pending]



Figure 10. Stormtroopers. Image by Carlos Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.



Figure 11. Law enforcement officers hold weapons as police clash with protesters, July 25, 2020, Seattle. [AP] [License pending]



Figure 12: A stormtrooper engages with the guests. Photo by jpellgen, "Interrogation," Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.



Figure 13. A mother and her 1-year-old child as surrendering to U.S. Border Patrol agents, June 2018, McAllen, Texas. [AP] [License pending].

that arouses feelings of amusement and pleasure, this is because the ride itself is a representation that merely invokes states of being, sentiments, and attitudes that subjectivity in its historical form already embodies within. If the acts of domination and subjection are expressed as recreation, this is because the ride as a representation only reproduces—albeit in an abstracted form of sci-fi theme—the experiences of domination and subjection comprising the collective life in the historical present. Representations, in their ability to arouse an emotive state, can only bring forth the elements of subjectivity and its associated emotive forces that are already found in collective life. They can neither create them on their own nor introduce them from without.

Subjectivity is essentially a historically determinate category. Its essence—its determinations—are immanently and necessarily normative: As a category, subjectivity is a *representation* of the notions of autonomy, freedom and reason. Second, and equally important, such category, in its determinations, become actual historically only through its adequate representations—representations by means of which subjectivity apprehends itself, that is, subjectivity as a historical development implied in Hegel's notion of consciousness of freedom. Although we find the clearest and most pronounced articulations of this representation in the subjective idealism of the late eighteenth-century philosophy (i.e., Kant and subsequently in Jena philosophers), eighteenth-century philosophy did not invent subjectivity. Rather, eighteenth-century thought more consciously articulated what had already been emerging as a part of the historical transformation and trajectory of European society: The development of category subjectivity in its individual form.¹⁴ In fact, in terms of the historical development of legal, political, and social institutions, European modernity can be understood as revolving around the representation of the category of subjectivity in its individual form and what the latter entails normatively, politically, and—since Descartes—for the very notion of truth itself. Put differently, subjectivity in its individual form had become the primary mode of self-understanding and an idealization that European modernity had put before itself.¹⁵ In this historical trajectory, the form of subjectivity capable of experiencing the simulation of total domination and subjection as a form of entertainment and the very existence of a theme park designed to recreate such experience as an amusement lay bare the radical transformation in this idealization as well as in subjectivity as a determinate being. In fact, normative notions of autonomy, freedom, and reason can no longer be coherently maintained as representations that had been once fixed upon and articulated through subjectivity as a category and a determinate being. The Disneyland ride, as a representation, carries the visible imprints of such truth of subjectivity as a determined category in the historical present. It marks the *autolysis* of the subject, the obliteration of the normative element in the ontology of the subject, hence its entire ontological element.



Figure 14. "Meeting the Stormtroopers" by Loren Javier is licensed under CC BY-NC- ND 2.0



Figure 15. U.S. Border Patrol Agents process undocumented immigrants at a processing center in Nogales, Ariz., April 6, 2006. [AP] [License pending]

Clearly, in a world beyond the theme park, what is being simulated as entertainment is very much a reality for the marginalized and the disadvantaged. However, we should be alert and not fall back on this point as an immediate line of reasoning. The fact that Disneyland offers the simulation of this reality as an amusement ride cannot simply be understood as disregard for the suffering of others. Nor can the form of subjectivity that is capable of experiencing what is simulated as a form of entertainment can simply be explained away as 'insensitivity' or a problem of recognition. What the simulation presents as a form of recreation, what such recreation represents in the form of entertainment expresses the fact that the content of the simulation and its normative implications are immanent to subjectivity as a category in the historical present. This is because such autolysis is not simply the question of the difference between a concept and its empirical instances— subjectivity in its ideal attributes, for instance, as the eighteenth-century philosophy conceived it vis-à-vis subjectivity as it exists empirically. Rather, this representation, the category of subjectivity it denotes in the historical present, expresses the fact that, as Hegel would put it—though for reasons that are diametrically opposed to those in the historical present— "the spirit has internally transformed itself."



Figure 16 . "Holding Cell" at Disneyland. Image by Steven Miller is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Such inner structure of the spirit consists in the normative structures of the collective life as a form of objectivity¹⁶; its transformation involves the transformation of the collective life in its very ontology and in the ontology of its categories.¹⁷ Neither of these can be apprehended by means of the conventional categories of paradigms of subjectivity. Rather, subjectivity in its autolysis needs to be apprehended vis-à-vis the social totality that brings it into being as such. Such autolysis of the subject and the normative structures of the collective life as a form of objectivity carry the imprints of the mediations of the commodity form that has "successfully" reconstituted collective life and the structure of social relations in its own logic, that is, commodity form as a self-moving mediation that materially abolished the conditions of possibility of collective life as ethical life through concrete processes of

commodity exchange and valorizing capital.



Figure 18. "Captain Phasma leads a platoon of First Order stormtroopers" by Dennis D is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.



Figure 19. Oakland Police Officers Moving In, January 28, 2012 "Occupy Oakland" by Glenn Halog is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

While the relation between the culture of simulacrum and the prominence of exchange value has already been pointed out by multiple and divergent analyses of postmodern culture¹⁸, what is crucial to recognize is that such relation involves more than merely the generalization of exchange value: It involves a thorough domination by value as the form of wealth which, in turn, entails an essential transformation of laboring activity—its quantification—as the fundamental element of commodity form and its organizing logic (see Postone, 1993). The fundamental feature of this commodity form consists in the ontological transformation of subjectivity as a category and as a determinate being, where the subject itself becomes a moment of commodity exchange, a placeholder in the circulation of commodities. Put differently, it is not only the realm of a sense of beauty and the fabrication of taste that is being absorbed by commodification as the mark of contemporary culture (cf. Jameson, 1984, p. 56). Subjectivity itself, in its processes of becoming, has become integral to the commodity form and to its mediations. As collective life as ethical life has been reproduced in the logic of commodity form, normative structures that sustain the subjectivity as such have qualitatively become a function of commodity form and its mediations. As a part of this process, representations of subjectivity as a normatively grounded category and a form of being have withered away from within the sphere of collective life— except as idealizations in accordance with fetishized notions of cultural and ethnic identities as manifested in recent authoritarian-populist political transformations, forms of religiosity, art, and philosophy.¹⁹ The logic of commodity form as a social form and its outcomes are already plainly observable in multiple spheres of collective life: The fact that the subject itself now has become a quantifiable value in the form of big data and the fact that algorithms can serve as an effective rendition of, and AI a functional substitute for subjectivity, are simply the plainly observable moments of this process of autolysis—representations where the subject has become a function of value in the valorization of capital. In effect, the Disneyland ride only discloses the practical and moral affinity for total domination on the part of the subject rather than an aversion to it. The outcome of the commodity form as the onto-genetic determination of the category of subjectivity is such that we might be very well at a point beyond the phenomenon of crises of institutions (Deleuze, 1992).

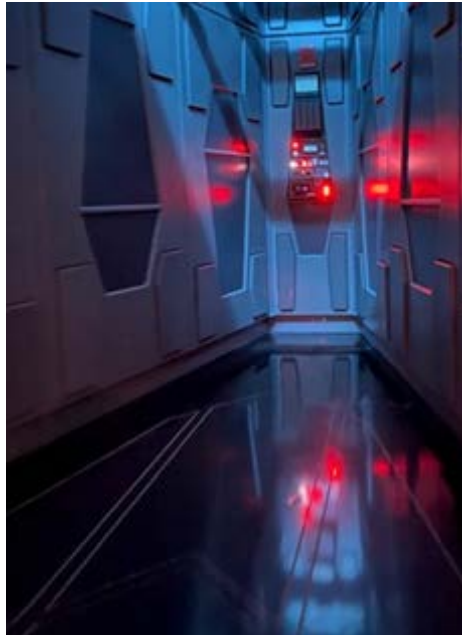


Figure 20. Inside the holding cell at Disneyland, Rise of the Resistance. "Inside Rise of the Resistance " by WDW Parks-Gal- Stock Published: May 2, 2023, is licensed under CC BY 3.0



Figure 21. U.S. Border Patrol Holding Rooms, Fort Brown Station, September 2014 . <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-15-521.pdf>

As the normative structures of collective life —social life as ethical life, or society as such—are overtaken and transformed according to the ends of capital, the latter re-produces collective life in its own ontology according to which qualitative difference could only become quantitatively determinate: subjectivity as a determined being, in its very ontology, becomes homogenized²⁰ and reproduced ultimately in the metaphor of value, a placeholder in the circulation of commodities.

This onto-genetic transformation of subjectivity as category and determined being finds its adequate expression in representations in culture industry and in the symbolic universe of commodified popular culture. The Disneyland ride is an instance of this representation, where subjectivity sets upon an external object, i.e., the simulation of a science fiction theme, and in doing so, brings forward and reconciles within itself what is actual, what is already *within* as an experience and what is immanent to modern subjectivity.



Figure 22. Men sleeping on the concrete floor and benches at U.S. Customs and Border Protection detention facilities in Tucson, Arizona. American Immigration Council <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/content/photo-exhibits-doe-v-johnson#>



Figure 23. Families at Department of Homeland Security detention center in McAllen, Texas. [AP] [License pending]

This representation, both in its *form* and *content*— the simulation and the actual content that comes forward through this form— is an expression of a state of becoming. The emotive experience and the form of consciousness the representation reproduces are already in the subject's experience, in its determinations, and in collective life as such: its autolysis as a category.

Although the ride is only a simulation based on fiction, as a matter of its ontological connotations for subjectivity, 'simulation' is not an illusion. As a representation, it is grounded in reality. While reproduced through and are inseparable from subjectivity, representations are not subjectively determined. They presuppose the subject. Their content is a representation of unanimous emotive states and collective states of becoming. Representations in the historical present are the mediated outcomes of the movement of categories of collective life. In the historical present, they mark the commodity form and its institutionalization as the structure of relations, reproduced within and through subjectivity; they mark the process of total transformation in objectivity that is reproduced, in symbolically mediated form, within subjectivity.²¹ In effect, the commodity form as a social form becomes the overdetermination of subjectivity in such a way that it obliterates the distinction between the absolute and the objective in the ontology of the subject by the subject's own activity. The Disneyland ride as a representation then becomes an affirmation of the subject's experience of its own radical transformation. While representation takes place through a curated excitement and entertainment, the very experience itself substantiates for subjectivity the negation of its own normative determination, the normative grounding of its own being, in effect, negation of itself as a determinate being.



Figure 24. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents apprehend migrants in El Paso, Texas. [AP] [License pending]

This is perhaps the irony involved in representations. While the ride itself is a simulation, it very much expresses the truth in the form of a representation—a representation through which what is already immanent to subjectivity as a historically determinate being: Simulations of domination, of deprivation of the sense of personhood and autonomy could, in fact, become affirmative experiences for a form of being who has already become both an agent and an object of the very processes. What Jameson appropriately refers to as the “underside” of postmodern culture, namely “blood, torture, death and horror,” as the “expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (Jameson, 1984, p. 57) have become immanent to— and in fact realized through—forms of subjectivity itself in the historical present irrespective of one’s particular locale relative to such underside. The effervescent feeling and the thrill the ride reproduces in its participants brings forward and fixes upon the abstracted narrative of science fiction the experience of social totality that recast subjectivity in its own mold. Analogous to what we observe, how a work of art confronts an “initial content” (see Jameson, 1984, p. 58), subjectivity appropriates its historical content. In the case of the Disneyland ride, such content—the autolysis—is reworked and experienced as entertainment, where the actuality of collective life and its processes are transformed into sources of amusement. The ride, in other words, and the

form of emotive state it invokes carries the imprints of totality, which creates the category of subjectivity. This is, in fact, why the ride, both in form and content, could indeed become a form of amusement: What is simulated as experience and the subjectivity that is capable of experiencing it as a form of entertainment are, in fact, the embodiment of the subjectivity in such ontological transformation.

If representations in popular culture bring to a relief a form of subjectivity for which simulation of total domination, subjection, and deprivation of personhood could be a form of entertainment, this is -only because subjectivity has already been reproduced in the mold of totalitarian domination of the commodity form.



Figure 25. Guests take a selfie with Stormtroopers at Disneyland. [AP] [License pending]

If the totalitarian domination of the past carried out its inner logic in the annihilation of the subject by means of mass exterminations legitimized by populist political and cultural ideologies, the form of domination in the present carries out its inner logic in the autolysis of the subject. Popular culture that produces simulations of detainment, submission, interrogation, and imprisonment as entertainment, as performances produced as a commodity, intended for consumption as an amusement, and consumed as such by the subject, is an instance of collective life that bring forth subjectivity in its autolysis. To reiterate, then, the Rise of the Resistance is not merely of anecdotal value. What the simulation brings forth through its content, as well as the ideas and ideals that such content discloses, is immanent to subjectivity in the historical present. As a representation, it is underlain by a form of universality. It expresses a form of collective life in the historical present. It reveals the demise of the subject both as a category and as a determinate being. In effect, it is a form of reconciliation of the subject and its experience of autolysis, a renunciation in the form of entertainment

Conclusion

Social theory adequate to its time must apprehend categories in their determinations, in their historicity, in their coming into being and transition as history presents them to us— where history itself is the emergence and movement of categories as forms of beings. In the proceeding account I attempted for such apprehension by building on *representations*. To reiterate, representations are not abstractions. They are determinate forms of thought with objective content. Such content exists independently, but is inseparable from consciousness. In Hegel's usage, representation captures the

subjective and objective moments of consciousness. In Durkheim's ontological paradigm, we find this idealist ontology reconstructed in social-theoretical terms to reveal the relationship between categories and collective life. By drawing on Hegel and Durkheim, I argue that representations are key to discerning the structure and mode of collective life in the historical present that becomes manifest through them. They are the embodiment of how collective life constitutes the consciousness of its members in its own image. It is in this connection that I argue that representations express socio-ontological processes and, as such, they carry the imprints of collective life and its categories as determinate beings. More specifically, they disclose a form of mediation in the historical present whereby truth reaches objectivity, objectively, as well as within the subject. By building on representations, critical ontology as a form of social theory can apprehend such truth, i.e., collective life and its categories in their mediation. One such category and representation in the historical present is subjectivity in its individual form. As a historically determinate category, its truth consists in its normative foundations—its moral and ethical determinations as a category and form of being. If we take up modernity on its own premise, the first article of subjectivity, its principle stipulation, and its determinations consist in the notions of autonomy, its freedom from being determined from without, and social life based on reason. As a category, however, subjectivity could only have become actual by comprehending itself as such, in its normative, ontological determinations, that is, if it has, in its actuality, the consciousness of freedom, if it has a representation of its own normative and ontological distinction as such.

What the representations in the historical present reveal, however, is an onto-genetic transformation of subjectivity, its autolysis. The Disneyland ride is an instance where such autolysis obtains its representations in and through popular culture, a moment where subjectivity in its individual form reconciles with its own ontology. *Rise of the Resistance* is not a satire but a stand-in. The spectacle it reproduces as a representation is not a moment of critical reflection but a moment of affirmation—affirmation of what is already familiar to the subject, what the latter can recognize as its own being. As a representation, it reproduces, through a seemingly fictional theme of popular culture, what is genuinely immanent to the subject in its determinations.

The category of subjectivity in its individual form—modern, bourgeois subjectivity—was a representation through which ideas and ideals of European modernity and its Enlightenment heritage—autonomy, freedom, and reason—had coalesced. The paradigms of subjectivity in social theory are, in fact, representations brought forward through such history. Their current prevalence expresses a particular epoch in the moral and intellectual universe of European modernity where the relative stability of the liberal democracy and the European welfare-state system had defined the second half of the twentieth century. This historically specific moral and intellectual universe had steered theoretical categories and intellectual concerns away from apprehension of contradictions in social totality and towards attempts to understand and diagnose the strains put on subjectivity, i.e., as impediments to the communicative structures of intersubjectivity, the struggles of subjectivity in its needs of recognition, and the articulations of the ideal conditions of a legal-rational framework for their realization. Nevertheless, a history that brought subjectivity into being a category also included—if not in fact made possible by—domination, alienated social relations, and reified forms of consciousness. The two sides of this 'Janus-faced' ontology of subjectivity, its historically determinate side as a category on the one hand and its representations on the other, express the fact that mediation of subject and object is also their transformation.

I started this paper by arguing that the task of critical ontology as a form of social theory is to apprehend categories in their mediation and in their becoming. In critical ontology, categories of subject and object, their differentiation and relation to each other are not the ontological foundations of being, nor are the foundation of science. They are the outcome of mediations of collective life, and only then they are also theoretical categories. To Hegel, the movement of categories (mediation of being and its other, their immanent development and differentiation, and negation of this differentiation in a higher unity) appeared to be a movement toward a consciousness of freedom. We must now recognize that the movement of categories—history as such—does not appear to be a movement toward the realization of freedom. Representations in the historical present express such movement—the negation of the category

of the subjectivity, but a negation that is completely one-sided, a negation of the normative grounding of subjectivity as it was once understood, a negation that does not ensue in higher unity. This is a mediation that materializes in subjectivity not as the individual but as the particular, a form of subjectivity that remains as a moment of ever-expanding, homogenizing universe of total commodification of the collective life. The subjectivity that can experience the simulation of its obliteration as entertainment is the embodiment of subjectivity in its autolysis. Social theory adequate to its time, a social theory that apprehends categories in their historicity, must seriously examine whether the subject has not become an illusion and whether maintaining that idea of the existence of the subject as an autonomous being became an ideology. This only means that the fundamental categories of the historical present need to be apprehended differently.

Endnotes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at Mid-South Sociological Association, Nashville, TN and Online, (2022). I would like to thank Harry F. Dahms, Alexander Stoner, Thomas Bechtold, Daniel Krier, and the anonymous reviewers for exchanges, comments, and critiques that immensely contributed to the clarity and substance of my analysis. My research was supported by a grant from the Provost's Office, California University Channel Islands. Stormtroopers image from "Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance" by Jeremy Thompson is licensed under CC BY 2.0

2 For recent articulations of paradigms of subjectivity, see Habermas (2022) and Honneth (2021). In observing the discrepancy between idealizations and practices in "social normativity" as a matter of the lack of credibility of the institutions, Habermas asserts the need to "rationally reconstruct" the principles of democratic and just political order from the "intuitive expectations and conceptions of legitimacy of citizens" (2022, pp. 147–149). For Honneth, the notion of recognition, taken as "intersubjectivist reinterpretation of Kant's notion of respect . . . describes the communicative conditions under which social recognition can take place at all" (2-21, p. 147). As Honneth puts it, "Only by recognizing each other as persons who deserve the right to co-determine our shared norms do we fulfill the condition for a normatively regulated social existence" (p. 175). The fact that they frame the discursive, cognitive, and rational potentialities in terms of mutual relations between subjects glosses over the fact that in their presupposition of categories, paradigms of subjectivity do not present any discernible difference from the mainstream social theory, especially vis-à-vis the category of subjectivity and its relation to social totality. Rather, a limited attempt to understand social beings through the logic of language and linguistic communication can be seen in Brown (2014). For my critique, see Kadakal (2023).

3 For the most compelling and thorough analyses of the historical present that build on the historicity of categories and their ontology, see Michael J. Thompson, *Twilight of the self: The Decline of the Individual in Late Capitalism*, Stanford University 2022. Thompson's work succinctly frames collective life in its current "post-neoliberal phase" surrounds the subjectivity in its individual form by means of re-creating the latter's needs, desires, interests, the perimeter of its knowledge, and the depths of its imagination" in its own logic. Thompson's argument

that we might be very well witnessing the "the disappearance of the critical, rational, autonomous self that was once the ideal of the humanistic Enlightenment" should be heeded urgently by any form of theory that understands itself as a form of intervention in the historical present. See Thompson's excellent framing of the question of subjectivity (pp. 2-26).

4 Most prominently, in Lyotard (1984) (Originally published in French 1979), Baudrillard (1994) (Originally published in French 1981), and Jameson, (1984).

5 The ride opened in California on January 17, 2020, and Florida on December 5, 2020. In 2022, Disneyland Park (CA) and Walt Disney World (FL) reported more than 16M and 17M attendance, respectively. The Global Attractions Attendance Report, 2022. TEA/AECOM Theme Index and Museum Index, published by Themed Entertainment Association (TEA).

6 For practical purposes, I am following the established convention in English translation of *Vorstellung* as "representations," although the latter does not fully convey the connotations of *Vorstellung* in the way Durkheim and Hamelin conceived it. In English, representation often gives the sense of German *Darstellung* rather than *Vorstellung*. For Durkheim and for Hamelin— whose philosophical elaboration on "representations" figures considerably in Durkheim's social-theoretical articulation of the term—"representation" is closer to French conscience than one could imagine such association in English. In fact, for Hamelin, "representation" involves a "reciprocity of being and knowing." See Hamelin (1925).

7 For the purposes of this paper, I limit my reading of *Science of Logic* to an account of categories to the subsequent development of ontological analysis in social theory and leave out a larger account and significance of the *Science of Logic* for the purposes of social theory and its categories.

8 Ironically, Talcott Parsons, who attempted to develop a categorical grounding of a systematic study of social reality profoundly misrepresented Durkheim's social theory. Subsequent development of mainstream American sociology never broke free from this Parsonian framework in approaching Durkheim's sociology.

9 The discussion of issues concerning various editions and translations of Hegel's *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion* is beyond the purposes of

this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to note in the early editions of the *Lectures* available to Durkheim, *Vorstellung* was assigned the subheading “Forms of Religious Consciousness.” For a thorough discussion of various editions of Hegel’s *Lectures*, see Dodgson’s “Editorial Introduction” to Hegel (1984).

10 As Durkheim puts it, “The ideas thus objectified are well founded—not, to be sure, in the nature of the tangible things onto which they are grafted but in the nature of society” (1915, p. 228).

11 Such a framework, in its elemental form, where group life is small in size and individuality and internal differentiation of collectivity are developed only to a small extent, manifests itself as and in contrast to modern society, moral conformity, and intellectual uniformity. See Durkheim (1915).

12 Durkheim appears to be more radical than Hegel, as he understands German *Verhaltnis* as “form of consciousness,” whereas given its context, Hegel seems to understand it as “a relationship of mind relative to its object” or simply as “relationship” or “attitude.”

13 Neither in Hegel nor in Durkheim do categories need metaphysics for their grounding.

14 This historical trajectory (also) included the category of person whose roots can be traced back to early Christianity. For such an articulation, see Mauss (1985).

15 For overlapping assertions of subjectivity albeit with differing accounts of ontology, see Worrell (2019). Worrell depicts ontological individualism in relation to the bourgeois liberal notion of the individual very aptly: “...flat intersubjectivity...where there is no reality beyond individuals...engaged in symbolic dances... agreements, negotiations, and contracts.” (2019, p.29).

16 In their critique of the delegitimizing notions of authority, Krier and Worrell underline that the concept of authority captures a particular content, a “form of moral surplus” emanating from collective life that takes the form of “should or a must.” (2017 p. 638). I take these forms of normative expectations—“moral surplus” in the form of should or must—as elements of what I refer to as the normative structures of collective life beyond the individual notions of morality whose content is, in fact, apprehended by Hegel through the notion of *Sittlichkeit*. Durkheim’s sociological paradigm, as I build on here, involves, among others, a social-scientific apprehension of such an ethical realm that emerges from collective life and takes the form of objectivity for its members. Normativity, in

other words, is an immanent feature of collective life and, in fact, its condition of possibility. What Jameson observes as “the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture” and the lack of ‘critical distance’ in late capitalism (1984 p. 87), I argue, reflect these normative structures in transition.

17 As Michael Thompson puts it, “Social ontology does not look for the content of all forms of social life, but rather for the basic underlying categories that undergird different forms of social reality. (2017, p. 25). As a matter of analytical framework, Thompson identifies substance, relations, process, and constructivism as distinct dimensions of social ontology (2017, pp. 25-32). In the main, the analysis I pursue here aligns with what Thompson captures under constructivism, as the latter appears to be a dimension of ontology out of which the other aspects can be discerned without submitting to any reductionist ontology while at the same time materially grounding ontology in concrete, practical activity, especially labor and its mediations that give rise to forms of objectivity beyond their immediate anchoring in social forms of labor.

18 As Jameson puts it, “the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange-value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced” (1984 p. 66). See also Lyotard, (1984)

19 For an excellent analysis of authoritarian and populist transformations in relation to new identities, see Antonio (2000). Antonio points out that what has animated new forms of what he calls “reactionary tribalism” is a “radical cultural critique of global capitalism and liberal democracy” on the other hand, and emphasis “on cultural identity and difference,” variously articulated in group identities “anchored in ethnic community” on the other hand. For an extensive account of fetishized notions of individuality, see Apter and Pietz (1993). For a critique of a fetishized notion of individuality, see Kadakal (2018).

20 See Hegel’s (1929) account of quantity, quality, and measure.

21 By building on Marx’s analysis, Krier and Amidon (2017) offer a succinct depiction of the material, psychological and cognitive processes at the level of subjectivity: “Capital absorbs living labor (ontologically somatic) and congeals/crystallizes/objectifies it into commodities (ontologically psychic as an object of desire), then through the process of realization, the absorbed labor undergoes another ontological transformation into money value (ontologically symbolic)” (p. 268).

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