

**Depression: Post-Melancholia,  
Post-Fluxus, Post-Communist, Post-  
Capitalist, Post-Digital, Post-Prozac**

By  
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**Abstract**

‘Depression’ has two conventional meanings: It can refer to an individual state of mind or to such collective conditions as economic crises. Each yielded their own visual languages and performances in the arts. With today’s entrepreneurship of the self, the two states seem to have converged. The fall of the wall, the 1990s dotcom boom and bust, the global financial crisis, all suggest that cycles of euphoria and depression have become collective and hyper-individualized at the same time. Ultimately, depression concerns notions of past, present and future.

**Risks and side effects**

[See Figure 1: Prozac writing block, p.65]

A writer’s block in every sense of the word: the Prozac logo placed above a clipped-on drawing depicting the writing block itself – a

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mise en abyme that infinitely sucks writers into a writing of writing of writing until conclusion seems impossible. Whether or not intentional in its dark humor, the block appears to be promotional merchandise designed by the marketing department of Eli Lilly, the company that produces the drug; unless of course it was created and planted there as a practical joke by students of the art school in the immediate neighborhood of the thrift store where it was found and bought, in the economically depressed Northern Dutch town of Groningen. The drug is now so commonly prescribed that in 2004, the British Environment Agency ‘revealed that Prozac is building up both in river systems and groundwater used for drinking supplies’.<sup>1</sup> According to the newspaper report, ‘overall prescriptions of antidepressants rose from nine million to 24 million a year’ in the UK between 1991 and 2001.<sup>2</sup> By 2013, this number had increased to 50 million.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Townsend, Mark. “‘Hidden Mass Medication’ As Prozac Found In Drinking Water.” *The Observer*, 8 Aug. 2004. Web. 10 Feb. 2016. <http://www.rense.com/general56/hiddenmassmedication.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> “Landmark Moment as Antidepressant Prescriptions Top 50 Million.” *Mind*. Mind.org.uk”... →

This essay was not written by a mental health professional, therefore its discussion of depression should be regarded more as pop psychology. No antidepressants were taken during its writing; it involved two periods of procrastination and writer's block.

[See Figure 2: Kodak advertising, 1889 and Figure 3: Muzak Corporation advertising, 1959, p.65-66]

### From Kodak to Prozac

The brand name Prozac, coined in 1987 for the drug Fluoxetine, evokes associations with Muzak, registered as a trademark by the Muzak Corporation in 1922 for its easy listening orchestral background music for factories, hotel lobbies, elevators and supermarkets. 'Muzak' had been branded as a riff on 'Kodak'. The consumer-oriented industrialization of image production that Kodak described in its advertising slogan 'You press the button, we do the rest' was supposed to have its equivalent in Muzak Corporation's industrial production and distribution of music. With Prozac, this principle proliferated

<sup>3</sup> 30 July 2013. Web. 10 Feb. 2016. <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/landmark-moment-as-antidepressant-prescriptions-top-50-million.aspx>.

to psychotropic drugs: 'The name Prozac was picked for its zap: it sounded positive, professional, quick, proey, zaccy. It was marketed in an easy-to-prescribe "one pill, one dose for all" formula and came when the medical profession and media were awash with horror stories about Valium addiction.'<sup>4</sup>

Prozac demonstrates that the notions of 'mass media' and 'creative industries' have shifted. These industries are no longer just producers of industrialized image and sound, but have become cybernetic producers in the most comprehensive sense of the word – which includes psychotropic drugs. In their historical succession, Kodak, Muzak and Prozac even suggest a shift from semio- to bio-business. The first two brands have gone through bankruptcy (Kodak) or faltered (Muzak) while Prozac remains and prospers. Alternatively, their lineage could be interpreted as a shift from leisure as a strictly separate sphere from work (Kodak with its focus on amateur photography) to blurring the lines between leisure and work (Muzak's entertainment for factories, elevators and supermarkets) to optimizing oneself

<sup>4</sup> Moore, Anna. "Eternal Sunshine." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 13 May 2007. Web. 10 Feb. 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/may/13/socialcare.medicineandhealth>.

## A SOLID INJURY TO THE KNEES

for a labor world (Prozac) where depression and self-blockade keep individuals from being productive.

‘Muzak is more than music’ was the subtitle of 1984 West German post-punk movie *Decoder*. The film offers little more than (often ludicrous) radical chic, featuring what was to become iconic underground figures including members of Einstürzende Neubauten, William S. Burroughs, Genesis P-Orridge and ex-junkie Christiane F. Yet it deserves credit for the speculative links it creates between media technology, Muzak and the industrial production of happiness. Minute 25:00 of the film shows the staff of H-Burger, a McDonalds-like burger chain, being drilled by a manager to ‘smile, smile, because we’re selling happiness’. At 31:00, customers happily eat their burgers while the film’s main protagonist (played by F.M. Einheit) dismantles the simulacrum by listening to a cut-up Muzak tape on his portable cassette player.

[See Figure 4: Photo montage based on *They Live*, p.66]

With this story, *Decoder* preempts a similarly themed yet better known film, John Carpenter’s *They Live* from 1988. In *They*

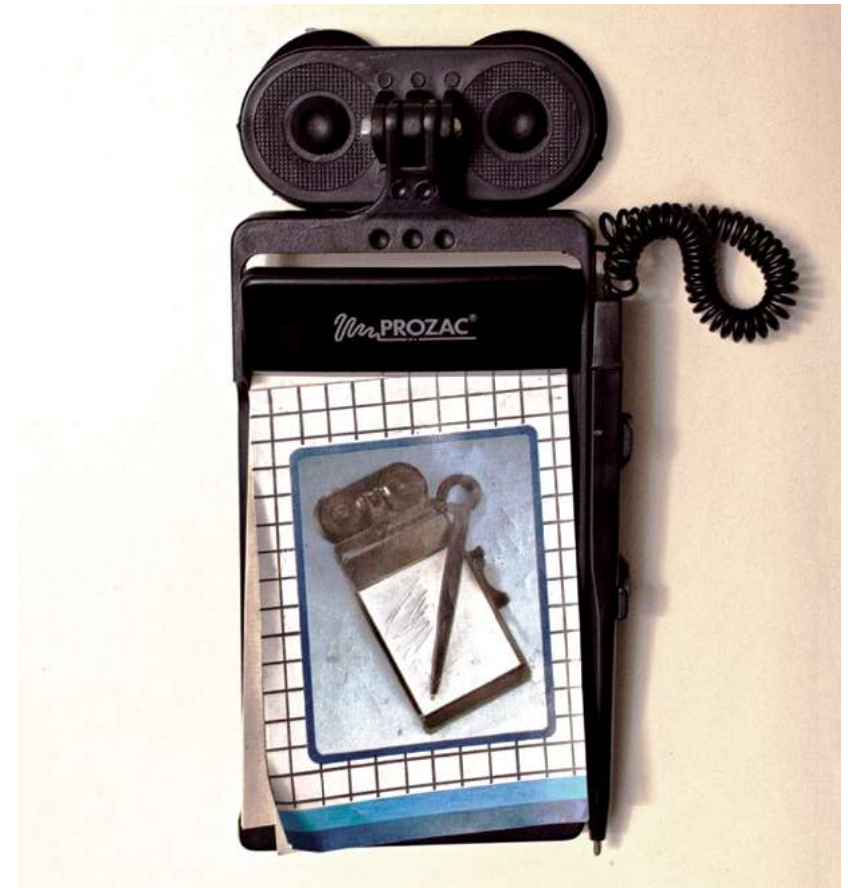


Figure 1: Prozac writing block



Figure 2: Kodak advertisement, 1889





Figure 3: Muzak Corporation advertisement, 1959



Figure 4: Photo montage based on *They Live*



Figure 5: Shepard Fairey's *OBEY* street art



Figure 6: Knock-off *OBEY* street cap





Figure 7: Student project by R. Beckford for the class Art and Society, CUNY LaGuardia Community College, 2014



Figure 8: Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514

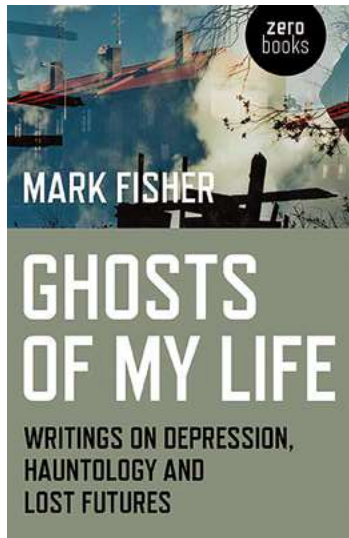


Figure 9: Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, book cover, zero books, 2014



Figure 10: Hans Bernhard/ubermorgen.com, *PsychOS*, 2004

## The Psych|OS Cycle UBERMORGEN

2001-2010

Psych|OS, Digital Cocaine - Children of the 1980s  
DVD, 01.00.00.1, 2003 - VIDEO DE/EN - VIDEO 2P  
VIDEO DESCRIPTION - SLIDESHOW - TOKYO INSTALLATION

Psych|OS, Digital Cocaine - Children of the 1980s  
Catalogue Text, 2005 - TEXT

Psych|OS - Hans 1 and 2  
Photos, 2004 - PHOTOS

Psych|OS - Hans 1 bw and 2 bw  
Photos, 2004 - PHOTOS - REVIEW IN GERMAN

The Psych|OS Generator  
Software, 2006 - SOFTWARE

Psych|OS - Zyprexa Lilly 1112 & 4117  
Paintings, 2006 - PAINTINGS

Psych|OS - hansbernhardblog  
Blog, 2005-2010 - BLOG (disabled)

Psych|OS - Psychotropic Drug Karaoke  
Splashscreen, 2007 - SPLASHSCREEN

Psych|OS - Self Portrait  
Photo, 2002 - PHOTO - SPLASHSCREEN

Psych|OS - Lilly controls my Foriginals  
Edition text by Domenico Quaranta, 2006 - TXT



Hans Bernhard is a chemical cyborg.

Hans Bernhard has been exposing, pushing, augmenting and enhancing his body with synthetic drugs for 25 years.

From 1984 to 1999 through the intense use of synthetic drugs such as LSD, ecstasy, meth, speed, fentanyl, angel dust, dextroamphetamine and nitrous oxide to explore, interact with and absorb contemporary digital networks and become part of them by zooming into techno music, digital art and mass media.

Since 2000, he has been protecting and enhancing his brain and body by the use of prescribed psychotropic drugs: Benzodiazepines, Glazapine, Sertride, Prothipendyl, Valproic Acid, Carbamazepine, Chlorprothixen, Zolopin, Oxymetazoline, and Salbutamol; all interacting with one another.

During his 25 years of substance abuse and after a series of brain upgrades, one day in march 2002, Hans experienced a manic outbreak and total mental meltdown in South-Africa.

This would later on be diagnosed as bipolar affective disorder and Hans would learn that he had prevented the outbreak of the illness for almost 15 years by means of self-medication.

Hans Bernhard's neuro-networks and brain structures are similar to the global synthetic TCP/IP networks he helped to build and to which he kept a close and subversive relationship. Both are highly unstable. And now, these networks are infected and contaminated by waves of mania and depression. WHO ICD-10, F31.1.

Contemporary high-tech societies deal with hardcore brains using bio-chemical agents to enhance & control the internal information flow, we call them psychotropic drugs.

We are all chemical cyborgs.

Figure 11: Hans Bernhard/ubermorgen.com, *Psych|OS*, 2001-2010

## Psych|OS-Generator

Select Sickness:  show diagnosis criteria

## HOW DO YOU FEEL?

- BETTER THAN USUAL
- OK
- WORSE THAN USUAL

## CURRENTLY DISABLED

TO GET THE PSYCHIOS GENERATOR OFFLINE VERSION:

[CLICK HERE.ZIP FILE](#)

## ICD-10

The PSYCH | OS Generator uses a strict set of numbering for all the diseases, it is the so-called ICD-10 which has been developed by the WHO/UN. Diagnostic guidelines are the key to the ICD-10, we use them here too, and have added some additional information from the DSM-IV (a national system in use in the USA and Germany).

Figure 12: Hans Bernhard/ubermorgen.com, *The Psych|OS Generator*, 2006



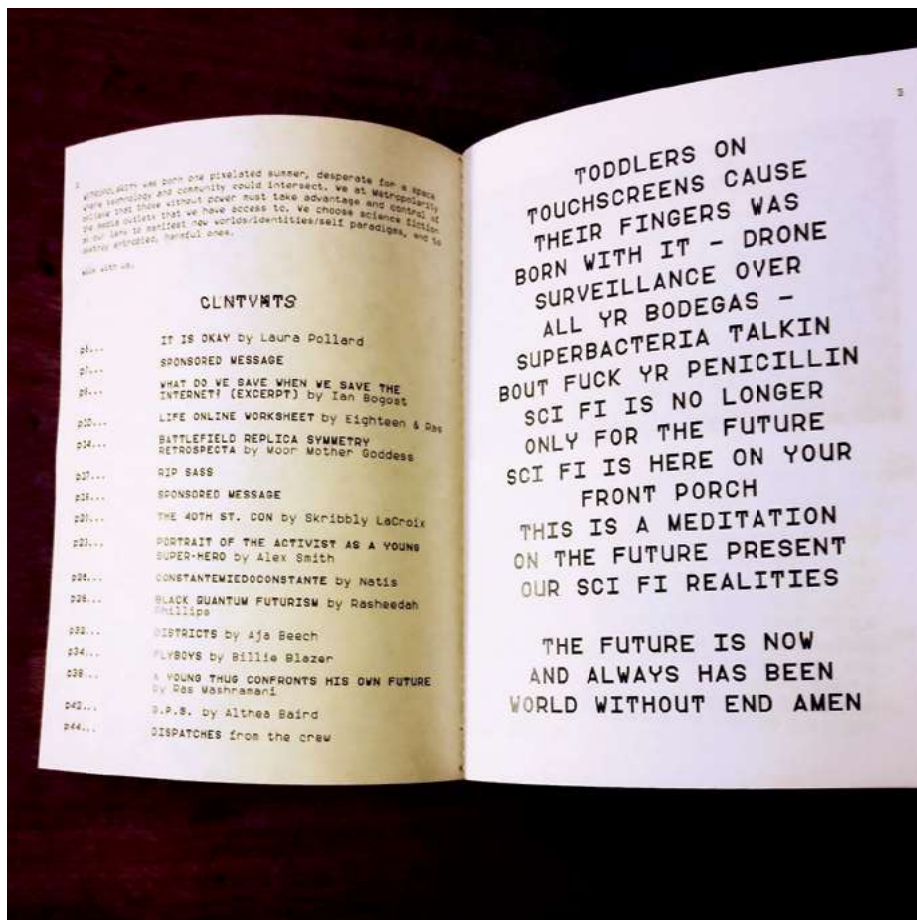


Figure 13: Metropolarity Collective, *The Future Now Never Present*, 2014

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*Live*, the once again, white male protagonist unveils the hidden reality of a city that has been invisibly taken over by aliens. Its streets are covered with subliminal propaganda messages that tell people to ‘OBEY’. The production design of the film took obvious inspiration from the work of American artist Barbara Kruger and its characteristic montage of political slogans on top of low-resolution black and white photographs. With the cult film status of *They Live*, the visual language of Kruger’s appropriation art eventually became better known as Hollywood’s appropriation of the appropriation. In 1989, street artist Shepard Fairey turned the ‘OBEY’ sign from the film into his street art tag, which he later developed into a world-famous fashion brand. Dystopian depression ended up as manic upbeatness. In critical theory terms, the four successive appropriations – Kruger’s, Carpenter’s, Fairey’s tag, the fashion brand – could be classically described as four successive commodifications. In French Situationist terms, as progressive recuperation of a détournement in which even the critique of spectacle ends up as spectacle. The latest reworking of the ‘OBEY’ sign however, namely the Chinese (Shanzhai) ‘OBEY’



[See Figure 5: Shepard Fairey's *OBEY* street art and Figure 6: Knock-off *OBEY* street cap, p.67]

base cap knock-offs sold worldwide at street markets (including Vilnius's central market hall), differs from previous ones. Kruger, Carpenter and Fairey's successive appropriations, used the sign in iconographic terms to create protected brands for specific targeted markets and creative industries. In contrast, the producers of the Chinese 'OBEY' caps looked at these former appropriations as free-market imitations, to which they added their own free-market imitation (as trademark-infringing goods). In the copy shown here, Kruger's, Carpenter's and Fairey's visual language dissolves with the word 'OBEY' shining in bright yellow and pink colors.

Each appropriation of the 'OBEY' sign could be read as two stories: one told by the visual content of the image and one told by its reworking of the previous image. At first glance, all 'OBEY' signs express a critical distrust in images as propaganda. But at second glance, they tell a story of circulationism of images, to use a term coined by Hito Steyerl.<sup>5</sup> *Decoder* and *They Live* use an

<sup>5</sup> Steyerl, Hito. "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" *e-flux journal* 49 (2013). Web. 10 Feb. 2016. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.

established trope of dystopian science fiction literature, that of biopropaganda forcing people into conformism while grim reality is covered with masking agents. In Stanislaw Lem's 1971 novel *The Futurological Congress*, the protagonist realizes that his perception is manipulated by 'mascons', psychoactive drugs that mask ugly reality: anything from facial blemishes to non-working elevators. However, mascons have negative side-effects that cause even more ugliness so that another layer of mascons is needed to cover them up, creating a vicious circle of mascon-taking.<sup>6</sup> Philip K. Dick's 1966 short story *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale* (adapted twice by Hollywood as *Total Recall*) plays with conflicting artificially implanted memories.<sup>7</sup> This recurring trope boils down to a variation on Plato's cave, whose shadow theatre deceives its inmates just like mascons deceive the protagonist of Lem's novel. Invisible messages manipulate the city of *They Live* and Muzak manipulates H-Burger eaters in *Decoder* ("h" being 1970/80s slang for heroin).

<sup>6</sup> Lem, Stanislaw. "The Futurological Congress. 1971." Trans. Michael Kandel. New York: Avon (1976).

<sup>7</sup> Dick, Philip K. *We can remember it for you wholesale*. Vol. 2. Citadel Press, 2002.

If one ignores this Platonic epistemological critique, then the typographic visuals from Kruger to the Shanzhaid base cap simply tell viewers, in different degrees of irony and affirmation, to get over their depression and circulate those visuals. The sign to 'OBEY. MARRY. AND REPRODUCE', from *They Live*, does not only address people but also addresses itself.<sup>8</sup> In today's language, the Barbara Kruger 1980s visuals were image memes, the kind of low-resolution, mass media-appropriating, text-and-image-combining, virally disseminated images that constitute a major popular culture of the Internet. As if to corroborate this reading, the meme creation web site *quickmeme.com* includes a category 'Barbara Kruger memes' that mostly contains manga and contemporary meme-style variations of her popular picture *Your body is a battleground*.

Arguably, the memetic qualities of Kruger's work lie not so much in its visuals and writing, but in its visual-typographic form. Kruger's high-contrast black-and-white photographs with superimposed white-on-red Futura bold type heavily

<sup>8</sup> It was adopted as an advertising slogan for Berlin's non-mainstream video rental store Videodrom in the early 1990s.

borrow from 1920s Russian Constructivist graphic design: from El Lissitzky and, most clearly, Aleksandr Rodchenko. Kruger's work thus marks a historical bridge between the two tendencies juxtaposed by Steyerl: Russian Productivism and Internet-age circulationism.<sup>9</sup> It thus questions whether the two really are as different as Steyerl argues.

[See Figure 7: Student project by R. Beckford for the class Art and Society, CUNY LaGuardia Community College, 2014, p.68]

### **(Un)production of melancholia**

Outside Internet meme culture, Kruger's visual form has often been copied by artists, designers and illustrators. The example above is from a 2015 graphic design class at CUNY LaGuardia Community College in 2015. The student describes the brief and his design as follows:

'A social problem that affects society today is teenagers trying their hardest to fit into social groups. This problem is imperative because it leads teenagers to stress, depression, or in some cases suicide. [...] I chose this image because

<sup>9</sup> Steyerl, Hito. "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" *e-flux journal* 49 (2013)

I believe that a teenage girl that is depressed duplicates the exact feeling of a teenager that forces themselves to fit into groups they are not familiar with.<sup>10</sup>

Next to Barbara Kruger, the design also echoes the classical Western iconography of melancholia, the pre-modern medical and philosophical conceptual precursor to depression. Since Erwin Panofsky, Raymond Klibanski and Fritz Saxl's *Saturn and Melancholy* from 1964, melancholia is one of the best-researched subjects in Western art history and iconology.<sup>11</sup>

[See Figure 8: Albrecht Dürer, Melencolia I, 1514, p.69]

In short, melancholy involves a highly canonized visual language whose origins lie in the Greek and Latin medical concept of black bile (the literal meaning of the word melancholia) and the four humors, of which black bile (melancholy) was one, among the sanguinic, choleric and phlegmatic humors.

<sup>10</sup> "Art and Society Class Blog @ CUNY LaGuardia College." CUNY LaGuardia, Q6 Sept. 2014. Web. 10 Feb. 2016. <https://artandsociety2014laguardiacollege.wordpress.com/2014/09/page/3/>.

<sup>11</sup> Klibansky, Raymond, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl. *Saturn and Melancholy; Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*. London: Nelson, 1964.

In the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, melancholy was emblemized in the image of a pensive person resting their head on their hands, often wearing a gag and sitting nearby water in order to indicate the risk of suicidal drowning. Panofsky and his co-authors reconstruct Renaissance melancholy in its relation to astrology and Neoplatonist doctrines of corresponding macro- and microcosms. Albrecht Dürer and Aertgen van Leyden's 16<sup>th</sup> century depictions of the subject stand in this tradition, with Dürer's work at the centre of Panofsky, Klibanski and Saxl's narrative. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Oxford scholar Robert Burton extended the notion of melancholy into a more general philosophical, literary and cultural subject. Its pictorial tradition lived on until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the work of early Romanticist Swiss-British painter Henry Fuseli among others.

*Saturn and Melancholy* is a poster work for the iconological method of the Warburg school that dominated 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarly art history and by reading the book we can relativize novelty claims for 'circulationism'. Not only do Renaissance emblems and Internet memes greatly resemble each other



in their respective visual compositions of headline, picture and bottom text. Arguably circulationism, in both senses of passive reproduction and active reworking, is present in both. The Internet simply served as an accelerator and intensifier of an economy and ecology of images created by print.

As circulationist objects, Renaissance melancholia emblems partly undermine their conventional reading as an early manifestation of the individuation of the modern, conflicted subject (whose poetics Friedrich Schiller branded, in line with late 18<sup>th</sup> century German idealist philosophy, as ‘sentimental’ as opposed to ‘naive’). How can an iconology that, over the course of centuries, likely had more copies and variations than the Doge, the YUNO and the Rickrolling memes put together, still signify individuality or subjectivation, except as a simulacrum or worn-out stereotype? Isn’t the emblem of melancholy for cultural history what a cumshot is for porn? Isn’t the cumshot, technically as well as iconologically, a perfect circulationist image irrespective of ‘old’ or ‘new’ media, in its migration from 35mm grindhouse cinema projection (film) via video-rental store VHS (analog video) to Pornhub.com (digital streaming video)?

While Renaissance melancholy seemed to comprehend all areas of knowledge and culture, as Panofsky and his co-authors show, the individuation it expressed meant that social issues were internalized. In that sense, melancholy is anti-political. Its humanist concept lacks the two aspects characteristic of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century discourses of depression: politics and economics. In his late lectures, Michel Foucault coined the term biopolitics as complementary to geopolitics, referring to the regulation of physical human existence through political means.<sup>12</sup> He linked it to individualized ‘technologies of the self’ such as meditation, prayer and asceticism. Contemporary phenomena such as the ‘Quantified Self’ movement of people measuring and optimizing their body functions through smart wrists, fitness and nutrition apps, perfectly fit Foucault’s definition of such technologies. From this perspective, Prozac is just another contemporary technology of the self; one that is industrially mass-produced and designed to aid industrial labour acceleration, scaling and optimization, in the very same way that the push of

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, Michel, Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, and David Macey. “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76*. New York: Picador, 2003.

the button on a Kodak camera accelerated, scaled and optimized image production. Contemporary art, with its prevailing market business model of selling autographs, has detached itself from industrialized image production. It's only logical that it is referring to itself as 'fine art' again after the term had fallen out of grace within modernism. Wherever it has claimed to be a factory product, from Andy Warhol to Jeff Koons, this was mostly brand differentiation for a production that in reality was no more industrialized than Rembrandt or Rubens' workshops of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. If contemporary art thus adopted the model of monastic production as its 'technology of the self', then one shouldn't underestimate that the monastery, in either its Christian or Buddhist form, is both a site of economic production and of recovery, restoring people to their productive function within the wider economic system.

Today's so-called refugee crisis proves the urgency of the notion of bio- and geopolitics. Both stand for a concept of the political sovereign while the so-called refugee crisis in Europe is dismantling biopolitical control as an illusion and sovereignty as a noble lie. What seems to be at stake is a transformation

of biopolitics into bioeconomics, alongside a transformation of politics into economics, which by far exceeds what Foucault himself anticipated with his coinage of 'neo-liberalism' in the same series of lectures.<sup>13</sup> What Foucault called neoliberalism was still the kind of postwar Western European capitalist systems that economists call social or ordoliberal. It was not yet a neoliberalism in which economic power threatened to take over political power, much like clerical power rivalled political power in the European middle ages. In today's colloquial understanding of neoliberalism, 'technologies of the self' have narrowed down to entrepreneurial self-optimization of the human body.

Consequently, under bioeconomic conditions depression is unproductivity. It transforms from an individual issue into a collective and systemic one. If someone is depressed and absent from the workplace, it means that somebody else has to take over their tasks, running the risk of overburdening and burning out. In psychiatric terms, burn-out *is* depression (in the sense that burn-out is a colloquial term for what the medical profession

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, Michel, Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, and David Macey. "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège De France*, 1975-76. New York: Picador, 2003.

calls ‘adjustment disorder’ or ‘reactive depression’). Thus, there is a systemic economic factor to depression in a labour world that leaves less and less room for workplace unproductivity, having compressed all human work tasks into high-performance processes after the less demanding tasks were automated. In this sense, the ‘Great Depression’ of the Fordist 1930s was prophetic of today’s bioeconomics of depression, where entrepreneurship of the self has rendered mental and economic crises co-extensive. In other words, by extending the meaning of ‘depression’ from a mental to a macroeconomic state, the Great Depression suggested a dialectics where the mental state of depression conversely had economic dimensions.

### **Bipolar Flux**

In a conference lecture, artist and researcher Renée Ridgway argued that one of the most influential art schools of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black Mountain College, was largely a product of the American 1930s depression.<sup>14</sup> To quote Ridgway:

‘The Great Depression gave rise to many utopian ventures - for example

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WPA (Works Progress Administration) from Roosevelt’s New Deal, which ended because of the war boom. [...] With the Depression, and later in the era of Roosevelt’s New Deal (The Public Works Art Project) the Black Mountain College arose from this financially distressed situation in the United States. [...] Black Mountain College had no endowment, each year funds had to be raised for the next session. Faculty took on salary reductions during hard times and the College was always very poor. The “work programme” in which students and faculty both worked together to build buildings, getting their hands dirty by maintaining the farm and growing food, harvesting crops and hauling coal. Studies were in the morning and evening, afternoons were for work duties or hikes. Living situation at Black Mountain College was communal, sleeping in dorms women were separated from men but 6 to a room. Therefore the school assigned everyone a studio for it was the only place one could be alone. Together faculty and students

<sup>14</sup> Renée Ridgway, lecture at the conference *Mobility Shifts*, New School, New York, October 15th, 2011



built the “studies building”, with their hands, which took 1.5 years to build. The school operated at a high pitch, if students couldn’t handle their individual responsibility they left. When the tension ran too high at the school, or if there was conflict or it became too intense, Albers would state that the classes would stop for a week and everyone needed to take a break, focusing on their own research. Officially they called it an “Interlude”, Albers called it “leisure time”, double time, where you worked harder on what was of interest to you.’<sup>15</sup>

This long quote captures what made Black Mountain College a dream and a nightmare at the same time: a utopia and a dystopia of art education. It suggests a reinterpretation of Black Mountain College as a historical example of the sublimation of a macroeconomic state of exception into a microeconomic state of exception, resulting in the permanent production of individual crises as self-optimization techniques.

To quote Ridgway:

‘Sexuality, love affairs, racial integration, leftist politics were all part of the

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picture but in 1955, students and faculty were not happy, financial problems were high and many turned to drugs and alcohol. Isolation resulted in them being their own little unique society and added to the intensity, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental breakdowns. Some stated that you had to know what the depths are, to understand the highs and that you are alive.’<sup>16</sup>

The art that grew out of the Black Mountain College into the off-gallery movements of the 1960s – Allan Kaprow’s happenings, Ray Johnson’s New York Correspondence School, the ‘Expanded Art’ mapped out by Fluxus founder and organizer George Maciunas – was performative and processual. Ridgway suggests that its performativity and processuality were not merely aesthetic but also biopolitical and bioeconomic choices that resulted in manic-depressive business cycles. It is little known that Fluxus was just as much an economic as it was an artistic project. Maciunas had originally conceived of Fluxus as a communist cooperative modeled after LEF, the 1920s Russian Productivist

<sup>15</sup> Renee Ridgway, lecture at the conference *Mobility Shifts*.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

*Left Front of Artists*, which converged around Sergei Tretyakov and Alexander Rodchenko. In a letter to Wolf Vostell, he wrote that:

‘One can say that Fluxus opposes serious art or culture and its institutions, as well as Europeanism. It is also opposed to artistic professionalism and art as a commercial object or means to a personal income – it is opposed to any form of art that promotes the artist’s ego. [...] Fluxus is a collective, like a Kolkhoz (collective estate), not a second self’.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout his career Maciunas developed a number of economic master plans and business models for Fluxus. Perhaps the three most significant of them were the Fluxus Editions, Fluxus Island and Fluxus Cooperative Inc. After returning from Europe to New York in 1963, Maciunas adopted the model of a publishing house for Fluxus. This was also motivated by his disappointment with Fluxus in Europe, where he had organised a series of festivals but found participants clinging to traditional forms of artistic identity. For Fluxus Editions, Maciunas expected artists

<sup>17</sup> Noël, Ann, ed. *Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas, 1931-1978, Based Upon Personal Reminiscences*. Thames and Hudson, 1998: 41-42.

to produce highly affordable, reproducible objects instead of autographs and sign over their copyright to Fluxus. This was the birth of the ‘multiple’, intended to radically change the economics of contemporary art from producing collectible gallery art for the few to LEF-style socialist productivism for the many.

Yet neither did Fluxus artists end up signing over their copyright, nor did the multiples really relinquish their status as autographs with collectible value, as most of them were individually numbered and signed. Maciunas’ vision of a truly collective practice that was neither promoting ‘the artist’s ego’ nor a ‘means to a personal income’, failed. According to Maciunas, his Fluxshop, where the multiples were sold, ‘didn’t make one sale in that whole year’,<sup>18</sup> and it closed in 1965 with a loss of \$50,000.

In 1969, Maciunas planned to buy the uninhabited Ginger Island, one of the British Virgin Islands, and turn it into a cooperatively ran Fluxus Island. With sound artists Yoshi Wada, Milan Knizak and the actor Robert de Niro (son of an abstract expressionist painter and Black Mountain College

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 114

graduate), Maciunas travelled to the island. Wada remembered the trip as follows:

‘A real estate broker took us by boat to Ginger Island. They promised to pick us up ten days later. They left us with no means of communication or a boat. We were totally deserted for that time in true Robinson Crusoe style. George knew about it, but the rest of us did not. It was too late to get upset and scream. I realized that this would be one of the most memorable trips I would ever take, be it Fluxus or not.

On the first day we decided to camp under some nice looking small bushes. The next morning, when we woke up, everybody’s eyes hurt. George was in the worst shape; he could not open his eyes at all. Everybody was sick. Later on we found out that these nice looking bushes were deadly poisonous.

We did not have that much to eat. The scariest thing was that there was no means to communicate with the outside world. Finally the realtor came back to pick us up. George signed an agreement to buy Ginger Island.’<sup>19</sup>

Fluxus Island was Maciunas’ most radical vision of a community business. Its immediate, arguably more successful, precursor was Fluxhouse Cooperative. In 1966, Maciunas used arts grants to buy up lofts in New York’s SoHo, at the time a purely warehouse district, and convert them into living and working spaces for artists. The project put Maciunas into personal jeopardy. He had to hide from the authorities for years and a dispute over a contractor’s bill had him beaten up, with ‘4 broken ribs, a deflated lung, 36 stitches in his head and blind in one eye’.<sup>20</sup> Although the Fluxhouse Cooperative eventually faltered and Maciunas died in 1977 at the age of 47, it remained his economically most visionary enterprise. Maciunas had not only started the gentrification of SoHo, but more generally

<sup>19</sup> Yoshi Wada, reprinted at Fluxus Foundation, Fluxus as Architecture, Ginger Island, <http://fluxusfoundation.com/fluxus-as-architecture/fluxus-as-architecture/ginger-island/stories-of-adventure/>. This episode fits the typical history of island settlements which German novelist and graphic designer Judith Schalansky collected in her book *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln* (*Atlas of Remote Islands*): most islands do not provide sufficient resources for a sustainable economy, which leads to quick exhaustion of natural resources and intolerable living conditions.

<sup>20</sup> Wikipedia contributors. “GeorgeMaciunas.” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 6 Feb. 2016. Web. 9 Feb. 2016. [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=George\\_Maciunas&oldid=703611225](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=George_Maciunas&oldid=703611225)



pioneered gentrification of urban neighborhoods through artist-run spaces, a success formula still in operation today. A success that of course, sharply contradicted his own political and economic intentions.

Maciunas may be seen as an artist whose primary works were economic experiments, the lifelong endeavor of translating a communist concept of political (= macro) economy into viable micro-economies. Projects that boomed and busted, running in perpetual bipolar cycles of euphoria and depression. In this sense, Maciunas did not only pioneer gentrification but he also preempted the creative dotcom economy with its manic-depressive model of incubators and startups.

Coincidentally or not, Fluxus includes some of the earliest art works and projects that have depression as their explicit subject. Ben Vautier's *Crisis and Nervous Depression* from 1962/1963 distills the stereotype of the psychopathic artist into an ironical-conceptual statement. In this sense, it's still about the 'artist's ego' and hence what Maciunas criticized as perfectly exemplifying the legacy of artist-as-genius that prompted him to leave Europe in disappointment, and demand in his 1963 Fluxus manifesto to 'PURGE THE WORLD OF EUROANISM'.

German Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell could also have been accused of Europeanism and of exhibiting the 'artist's ego' that Maciunas criticized in a letter to him. Yet, by pioneering television and video art, together with Nam June Paik, his choice of media might have been closer to the Fluxus ideal of art as popular amusement than Maciunas' own Fluxus Editions. Vostell's installation *Endogene Depression*, first shown in 1963, mixed defunct and partly broken-up television sets with concrete blocks and roaming live animals. Reviewing the work in 2014, artist and critic Joseph Nechvatal found that:

'The title *Endogene Depression* is particularly telling. Endogenous substances are those that originate from within an organism, tissue, or cell. Endogenous viral elements are DNA sequences derived from viruses that are ancestrally inserted into the genomes of germ cells. [...] Thus the installation delightfully calls forth broadcast media as a viral entity within a conjugal host.'<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Nechvatal, Joseph. "How a Fluxus Pioneer Tuned Televisions to a World of Noise." *Hyperallergic*. 28 Oct. 2014. Web. 09 Feb. 2016. <http://hyperallergic.com/158926/how-a-fluxus-pioneer-tuned-televisions-to-a-world-of-noise/>.

This puts Vostell into the vicinity of William S. Burroughs with his poetics of language and mass media as viral agents. Burroughs' poetics were also the blueprint for *Decoder*. In *Decoder* Muzak is just one of several psychotropic mass media that become critically disrupted through signal interference. Thus Vostell's installation could be read as another such interference, a subversive re-programming of the mass medium of television. However, principally it constructs a post-apocalyptic world *after* television, where empty screens stare at roaming animals, while those creatures whose existence had previously mediated between electronic technology and animals, namely humans, are absent. This seems to contradict the title *Endogene Depression*. One would normally assume a posthuman landscape to be exogenous as it would not have originated from within an organism. In Vostell's installation, this organism must either have destroyed itself or the work is an update of the Renaissance iconography of melancholia; a 20th century version of the disenchanted, introverted view within a deserted environment, from a post-human instead of a humanist perspective.

[See Figure 9: Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, book cover, zero books, 2014, p.70]

### Hauntologies

In contemporary language, Vostell's installation could be said to produce a 'hauntology'. This portmanteau word of 'haunted' and 'ontology' was coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida in the early 1990s<sup>22</sup> and was recently revived by British pop culture and music criticism as a tag for decay aesthetics, including retro phenomena, contemporary uses of analog and dead media, as well as the obsessions of (predominantly Western and white) pop culture with its own past. Mark Fisher's 2014 *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures* bemoans a 'slow cancellation of the future' throughout culture and present-time politics.<sup>23</sup> Fisher turns Derrida's broad philosophical concept into a more narrow diagnosis of his own time and culture. Mourning over the cultural wastelands left behind by Thatcherism, hauntology has an air of white nostalgia, in contrast to non-white visions on contemporary culture

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*, New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>23</sup> Fisher, Mark. *Ghosts of my life: Writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures*. John Hunt Publishing, 2014.

such as Afrofuturism. Even Afropessimism that manifested after the police shootings of black people in the U.S. – Michael Brown in 2014, Freddy Gray in 2015 – <sup>24</sup> cannot be hauntological in Fisher’s sense, since the past and recent present to which it refers, do not lend themselves to nostalgia. Given the history of American slavery and race discrimination laws effective until the 1960s, Afrofuturism looks at the future as full of promise, in contrast to a recent past and present still bound by trauma.

Derrida’s hauntology was visionary since it predicted, a few years after the fall of the Wall, at the most unlikely moment in history that the specters of Marx would not go away. Today, they are back with a vengeance. The global economic depression is the financial system collapse of 2008 frozen into a permanent state of exception. Although it appears to be the eternal return of the same (with the identical ingredients of the 1930s Great Depression) overheating of deregulated financial markets, its story differs from a European perspective. Today’s crisis can

<sup>24</sup> On the notion of Afropessimism, see Sexton, Jared, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism”, *InTensions Journal*, 5, 2011. <http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/pdfs/jared-sextonarticle.pdf>

also be seen as the last of a series of manic-depressive shakeups that began with the collapse of Eastern European communism in 1990, continued with the collapse of the ‘new economy’ in 2000, out-of-control global conflicts since 9/11 and rippling bursts of speculation bubbles.

Alexander Brener’s spray painting of Malevich’s *White Cross* with a dollar sign, exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1997, could thus be framed as an emblem for the whole period after 1990. It was widely perceived as nihilistic or attention-seeking vandalism at the time, but as a most precise artistic statement in retrospect. From a contemporary bio-economical perspective however, it can be read as something quite different from what the artist likely intended. Through a contemporary lens, the spray-painted dollar sign does not simply dismantle capitalist materialism’s takeover of Malevich’s suprematist immaterialism. Rather, it creates a dialogue between two currencies: the painting with its speculative art market value versus the dollar as a no less speculative currency.

Abstract-conceptualist painting and dollar currency both embody economics

wherein exchange value has been maximally abstracted from material production value. Conceptual art, with its ‘dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972’<sup>25</sup> thus can be seen as a forerunner of the decoupling of the U.S. dollar and other Western currencies from the gold standard in 1971. Malevich’s painting, spray-painted by Brener, poses the fundamental question of whether the dollar sign and the suprematist painting devalue each other or add to each other’s value, perhaps even beyond the sum of their parts. There can be no definite answer to this question, only tentative responses depending on fleeting business cycles. Whose rates will go up? Whose will go down? What are their interference effects? Can we analyse the Malevich/Brener/dollar superimposition as schizophrenic or as bipolar? Does the superimposition transform Malevich’s static, almost sculptural suprematist work into a time-based experimental object?

Of course, this interpretation contradicts Brener’s declared anti-capitalist intentions. In 2002 he and his partner Barbara Schurz co-wrote a pamphlet on the *Necessity of a Cultural Revolution*. It frames depression as

<sup>25</sup> Lippard, Lucy R. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. New York: Praeger, 1973.

a product of neoliberal culture and continues where Maciunas’ critique of the artist’s ego left off:

‘As we are talking about a cultural revolution, it would be logical to assume that it should be created by the hands of today’s “cultural workers”: the artists, film directors, actors, authors, philosophers, theoreticians and critics. But in the course of our search for revolutionary cultural workers, we have mostly only shrugged our shoulders and ground our teeth. Ha-ha-ha-ha! Today’s cultural workers are a herd of vain and coquette fartars tamed by Power - and nothing more. At least half of them are in search of success, money and recognition from so-called experts and the mass media. They dream of one day standing amongst the rows of the neoliberal elite. They want to appear on the glossy pages of fashion magazines, right next to the models. Of course, it would be unfair to accuse all of these initiatives without exception – We repeat: Today’s cultural field is strongly fragmented – Within it are not only the successful, self-assured winners but also more or less unsatisfied,

frustrated, doubting, thrown-out, depressed, lost and bitter and it is to them that we appeal.’<sup>26</sup>

What Brener and Schurz describe here, and also address in their public actions, amounts to a larger story of post-1990 hypercapitalism. Curator and critic Inke Arns, who extensively wrote on Laibach, NSK and Slovenian underground conceptual art before 1990, suggests a connection between post-communist condition and the introduction of the World Wide Web. In an interview in the journal *e-flux*, she argues that ‘the introduction of the Internet in Europe around 1994 produced a genuinely utopian feeling’ with ‘this utopian hope that this was the ultimate medium that would change the world, which now sounds strange looking back at it.’<sup>27</sup> Retrospectively, the Internet and Westernization of Eastern Europe share large parts in the same cultural, political and economic narrative.

<sup>26</sup> Brener, Alexander, and Barbara Schurz. “The Necessity of a Cultural Revolution.” *PubliX Theater Caravan*. mov, Feb. 2002. Web. 09 Feb. 2016. [http://no-racism.net/publix/publix\\_texts.html](http://no-racism.net/publix/publix_texts.html).

<sup>27</sup> Petrešin-Bachelez, Nataša. “Blame It on Gorbachev: The Sources of Inspiration and Crucial Turning Points of Inke Arns.” *E-flux Journal* #1. *E-flux*, Dec. 2008. Web. 10 Feb. 2016. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/blame-it-on-gorbachev-the-sources-of-inspirationand-crucial-turning-points-of-inke-arns>.

[See Figure 10: Hans Bernhard/ubermorgen.com, *PsychOS*, 2004, p.70]

### **The future now never present**

The work of Swiss-born, Vienna-based artist Hans Bernhard is as emblematic for the 1990s/2000s Internet boom and bust as Brener’s work is for post-communism. In 1994, Bernhard co-founded Austrian artist group *etoy*, which posed as an empty, content-devoid cyber startup, dressed in orange uniforms with shaved heads and adopting a macho corporate capitalist identity with stock market shares and a rented helicopter. In the early 2000s, Hans Bernhard quit *etoy* and reappeared under the moniker *ubermorgen.com* with his partner Lizvix, partly as a consequence of his mental breakdown after excessive drug use during the *etoy* period, followed by psychiatric treatment and a diagnosis with bipolar disorder. Bernhard openly discusses his ongoing treatment, often bringing large plastic bags with the packages of his prescribed drugs to public presentations and his personal blog lists nothing but the names and doses of drugs he took on a particular day.

[See Figure 11: Hans Bernhard/ubermorgen.com, *Psych|OS*, 2001-2010 and Figure 12 :Hans Bernhard/ubermorgen.com, *The Psych|OS Generator*, 2006, p.71]

Within net.art and a larger field of media activism, ubermorgen became famous for *voteauction.com*, a website that pretended to be a selling and buying platform for votes in the American presidential election of 2000. It resulted in the artists, disguised as Internet startup entrepreneurs, coming under FBI investigation as well as a half-hour breaking news special on CNN about ‘a foreign company trying to manipulate the American vote’. *Psych|OS*, a lesser known work by ubermorgen, started in 2001 with pictures and videos taken by Bernhard in hospital during psychotic states, including a self-portrait whose making he does not remember and professionally shot photographs of him as a patient. However, the most comprehensive work in this series is a piece of software called *Psych|OS-Generator*, a web application that allows everyone to select their own psychosis from a menu and further specify specific illness symptoms. The software adheres to the World Health Organization’s ICD-10 numbering system for diseases. At the end of each multiple-choice procedure,

it prints out a drug prescription conforming either to European or American standards complete with a fake doctor’s signature.

*Psych|OS* couldn’t be a more literal title for the work, since it constitutes an operating system running on psychoses as its data set as well as amounting to a cybernetic sculpture of psychoses as programmed systems. Furthermore, it is a piece of perverse entrepreneurship of the self that outsources the medical profession to algorithms, replacing it with its own bio-economics for the depressed. Where Brener and Schurz still retain their optimism in depression as a driving force for revolution, in *Psych|OS* only depression and dystopia remain, except for a small moment of freedom in the humor of the piece.

[See Figure 13: Metropolarity Collective, *The Future Now Never Present*, 2014, p.72]

*Psych|OS-Generator* epitomizes what Afro-futurist writer Ras Mashramani calls science fiction as the current condition rather than a vision of the future. We are already living in Philip K. Dick, J.G. Ballard, Stanislaw Lem and Vladimir Sorokin’s dystopias (or utopias, depending on the euphoric or depressive spin one might give to their stories). Mashramani



co-founded Metropolarity, a punk-queer science fiction collective based in Philadelphia. In Metropolarity's zine *Journal of speculative vision and critical liberation technologies*, she published the following text:

'Toddlers on touchscreens cause  
their fingers was born with it - drone  
surveillance over all yr bodegas -  
superbacteria talkin bout fuck yr  
penicillin

Sci Fi is no longer only for the future

Sci Fi is here on your front porch

This is a meditation on the future  
present

our sci fi realities.

The future is now

and always has been

world without end amen.'<sup>28</sup>

While this post-apocalyptic imagery is superficially reminiscent of Vostell's *Endogene*

<sup>28</sup> The Future Now Never Present: *Journal of Speculative Vision and Critical Liberation Technologies* vol., no. 2 (2014): 3.

*Depression*, it is not expressive of an end-of-the-world scenario (as is stated clearly in the last few lines) either, nor even of a post-human vision, since in the narrative of this text, humanism never existed to begin with. This is where Mark Fisher, quoting Kodwo Eshun, links hauntology to Afrofuturism:

'Put bluntly, we might say that post-modernity and hauntology confront "white" culture with the kind of temporal disjunction that has been constitutive of the Afrodiasporic experience since Africans were first abducted by slavers and projected from their own life-world into the abstract space-time of Capital. [...] Forcibly deprived of their history, the black slaves encountered "postmodernity" three hundred years ago: "the idea of slavery itself as an alien abduction . . . means that we've all been living in an alien-nation since the 18<sup>th</sup> century' (Eshun 1998: A [192])<sup>29</sup>

Evoking the 'spectre haunting Europe' of the Communist Manifesto, Derrida's 'hauntology' in the Spectres of Marx was, above all, an

<sup>29</sup> Mark Fisher, The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology Dancecult: *Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5(2): 42-55, 2013

answer to Francis Fukuyama's neo-Hegelian (and neoconservative) 'end of history' after the end of the Cold War. Hauntology is about the ghost, the zombie, that has been declared dead, yet by still haunting the present causes a disruption in time. While Fisher's reading of hauntology in relation to Afrofuturism is sympathetic with the latter, it is problematic. Firstly because it seems to reduce Afrofuturism to 'confront[ing] "white" culture'. Secondly, by disrupting only the past and the present, hauntology actively excludes the future, unlike Afrofuturist thinking. The future thus remains what it used to be (in Christian and Islamic eschatology, at least): a horizon of hope for absolution, a belief, a smokescreen that makes depression bearable, or its dystopian other. In this notion of the future, depression can only be attached to the past. Hauntology thus becomes a recipe for stigmatizing depression rather than embracing it.

Depression is timeless. It doesn't discriminate against anyone. With no horizon, race or class privilege, depression creates the lives that perfectly fit front porch dystopia. Let's demand justice for depression, not cures.

- 1 Prozac writing block, photograph by Florian Cramer, 2012
- 2 Kodak newspaper advertising, 1889
- 3 Muzak Corporation advertising, 1959
- 4 Photo montage based on motifs of the film *They Live* by Fabian, Berlin, 2009, used according to the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0) license; original image on <https://flic.kr/p/5XH5gp>
- 5 Shepard Fairey's *OBEY* street art, photograph by Eva Rinaldi, 2012, used according to the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-SA 2.0) license; original image on <https://flic.kr/p/boW4uM>
- 6 Anonymous, *OBEY* street cap sold at the Halès market in Vilnius, photograph by Florian Cramer, 2015
- 7 Student project by R. Beckford for the class Art and Society, CUNY LaGuardia Community College, 2014, original blog entry and image at <https://artandsociety2014laguardiacollege.wordpress.com/2014/09/16/design-project-i-must-fit-in/>
- 8 Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514, image by Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Albrecht\\_D%C3%Bcrer#/media/File:D%C3%Bcrer\\_Melancholia\\_I.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Albrecht_D%C3%Bcrer#/media/File:D%C3%Bcrer_Melancholia_I.jpg), licensed in the public domain.
- 9 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, book cover, zero books, 2014
- 10 Hans Bernhard/ubermorgen.com, *Psych|OS*, 2004, photo by Oliver Jiszda Photography Vienna - Los Angeles
- 11 Hans Bernhard/ubermorgen.com, *Psych|OS*, 2001-2010, project website (screenshot)
- 12 Hans Bernhard/ubermorgen.com, *The Psych|OS Generator*, 2006, website (screenshot)
- 13 Metropolarity Collective, *The Future Now Never Present*, text and image by Ras Mashramani, 2014