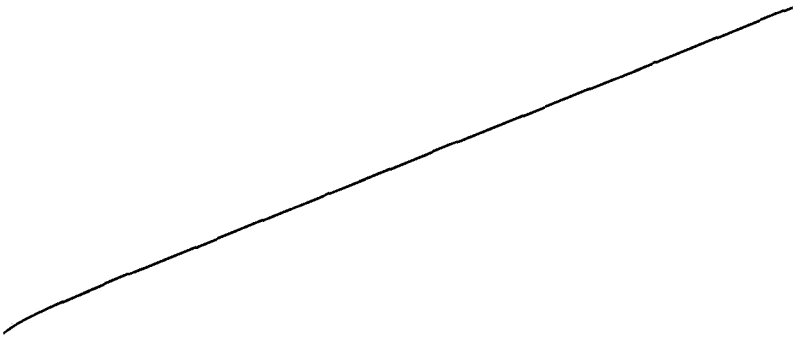
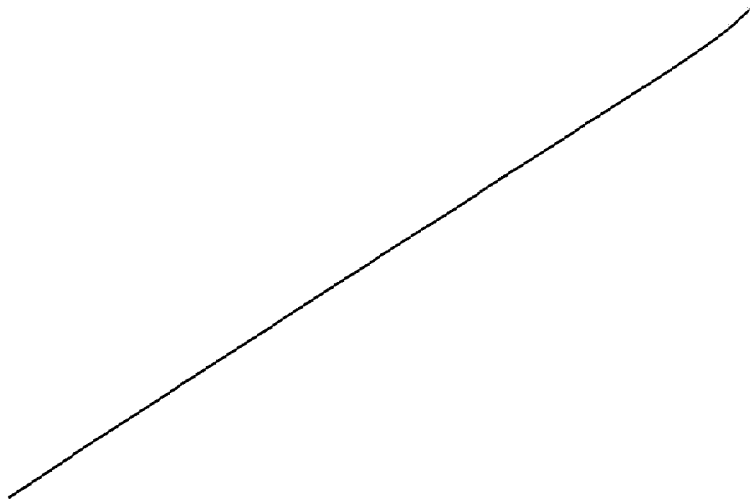


**Terminator
VS
Avatar**

Mark Fisher

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Why political intellectuals, do you *incline* towards the proletariat? In commiseration for what? I realize that a proletarian would hate you, you have no hatred because you are bourgeois, privileged, smooth-skinned types, but also because you dare not say the only important thing there is to say, that one can enjoy swallowing the shit of capital, its materials, its metal bars, its polystyrene, its books, its sausage pâtés, swallowing tonnes of it till you burst—and because instead of saying this, which is *also* what happens in the desires of those who work with their hands, arses and heads, ah, you become a leader of *men*, what a leader of *pimps*, you lean forward and divulge: ah, but that's alienation, it isn't pretty, hang on, we'll save you from it, we will work to liberate you from this wicked affection for servitude, we will give you dignity. And in this way you situate yourselves on the most despicable side, the moralistic side where you desire that our capitalize desires be totally ignored, brought to a standstill, you are like priests with sinners, our servile intensities frighten you, you have to tell yourselves: how they must suffer to endure that! And of course we suffer, we the capitalized, but this does not mean that we do not enjoy, nor that what you think you can offer us as a remedy—for what?—does not disgust us, even more. We abhor therapeutics and its vaseline, we prefer to burst under the quantitative excesses that you judge the most stupid. And don't wait for our spontaneity to rise up in revolt either.¹

In the introduction to his 1993 translation of Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, Iain Hamilton Grant refers to a certain 'maturity of contemporary wisdom'. According to this 'maturity', Grant observes, *Economie Libidinale* was 'a minor and short-lived explosion of a somewhat naive anti-philosophical expressionism, an aestheticizing trend hung over

1. J.-F. Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. I.H. Grant (London: Athlone, 1993), 116. See this volume, 218.

from a renewed interest in Nietzsche prevalent in the late 1960s'.² Grant groups Lyotard's book with three others: Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Luce Irigaray's *Speculum: Of the Other Woman* and Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. 'Libidinal Economy has in general drawn little critical response', Grant continues, 'save losing Lyotard many Marxist friends. Indeed, with a few exceptions it is now only Lyotard himself who occasionally refers to the book, to pour new scorn on it, calling it his "evil book, the book that everyone writing and thinking is tempted to do":³ This remained the case until Ben Noys's *The Persistence of the Negative*, in which Noys positions *Libidinal Economy* and *Anti-Oedipus* as part of what he calls an 'accelerationist' moment.⁴ A couple of quotes from these two texts immediately give the flavour of the accelerationist gambit. From *Anti-Oedipus*:

But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one?—To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World Countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist 'economic solution'? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go further still, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to 'accelerate the process,' as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven't seen anything yet.⁵

2. Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, xvii.

3. *Ibid.*, xviii; quoting Lyotard's 1988 *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*.

4. B. Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

5. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans R. Hurley, M. Seem, H. R. Lane (London: Athlone, 1984), 239–40. See this volume, 162.

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And from *Libidinal Economy*—the one passage from the text that is remembered, if only in notoriety:

The English unemployed did not have to become workers to survive, they—hang on tight and spit on me—enjoyed the hysterical, masochistic, whatever exhaustion it was of hanging on in the mines, in the foundries, in the factories, in hell, they enjoyed it, enjoyed the mad destruction of their organic body which was indeed imposed upon them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolutions of their families and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous anonymity of the suburbs and the pubs in morning and evening⁶

Spit on Lyotard they certainly did. But in what does the alleged scandalous nature of this passage reside? Hands up who wants to give up their anonymous suburbs and pubs and return to the organic mud of the peasantry. Hands up, that is to say, all those who really want to return to pre-capitalist territorialities, families and villages. Hands up, furthermore, those who really believe that these desires for a restored organic wholeness are *extrinsic* to late capitalist culture, rather than fully incorporated components of the capitalist libidinal infrastructure. Hollywood itself tells us that we may appear to be always-on techno-addicts, hooked on cyberspace, but inside, in our *true selves*, we are primitives organically linked to the mother/planet, and victimised by the military-industrial complex. James Cameron's *Avatar* is significant because it highlights the disavowal that is constitutive of late capitalist subjectivity, even as it shows how this disavowal is undercut. We can only play at being inner primitives by virtue of cinematic proto-VR technology whose very existence presupposes the destruction of the organic idyll of Pandora.

6. Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 111. This volume, 212.

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And if there is no desire to go back except as a cheap Hollywood holiday in other people's misery—if, as Lyotard argues, there are no primitive societies (yes, 'the Terminator was there from the start, distributing microchips to accelerate its advent'); isn't, then, the only direction forward? Through the shit of capital, its metal bars, its polystyrene, its books, its sausage pâtés, its cyberspace matrix?

I want to make three claims:

1. Everyone is an accelerationist.
2. Accelerationism has never happened.
3. Marxism is nothing if it is not accelerationist.

Of the 70s texts that Grant mentions in his round-up, *Libidinal Economy* was in some respects the most crucial link with 90s UK cyber-theory. It isn't just the content, but the intemperate tone of *Libidinal Economy* that is significant. Here we might recall Žižek's remarks on Nietzsche: at the level of content, Nietzsche's philosophy is now eminently assimilable, but it is the style, the invective, of which we cannot imagine a contemporary equivalent, at least not one that is solemnly debated in the academy. Both Iain Grant and Ben Noys follow Lyotard himself in describing *Libidinal Economy* as a work of affirmation, but, rather like Nietzsche's texts, *Libidinal Economy* habitually defers its affirmation, engaging for much of the text in a series of (ostensibly parenthetical) hatreds. While *Anti-Oedipus* remains in many ways a text of the late 60s, *Libidinal Economy* anticipates the punk 70s, and draws upon the 60s that punk retrospectively projects. Not far beneath Lyotard's 'desire-drunk yes' lies the No of hatred, anger and frustration: no satisfaction, no fun, no future. These are the resources of negativity that I believe the left must make contact with again. But it's now necessary to reverse the Deleuze-Guattari/*Libidinal Economy* emphasis on politics as a means to greater libidinal intensification: rather, it's a question of instrumentalising libido for political purposes.

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If *Libidinal Economy* was repudiated, but more often ignored, the gos theoretical moment to which Grant's own translation contributed has fared even worse. Despite his current reputation as a founder of speculative realism, Grant's incendiary gos texts—sublime cyborg surgeries suturing *Blade Runner* into Kant, Marx and Freud—have all but disappeared from circulation. The work of Grant's one-time mentor Nick Land does not even draw derisive comment. Like *Libidinal Economy*, his work, too, has drawn little critical response—and Land, to say the least, had no Marxist friends to lose. Hatred for the academic left was in fact one of the libidinal motors of Land's work. As he writes in 'Machinic Desire':

Machinic revolution must therefore go in the opposite direction to socialistic regulation, pressing towards ever more uninhibited marketization of the processes that are tearing down the social field, 'still further' with 'the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization' and 'one can never go far enough in the direction of deterritorialization: you haven't seen anything yet'.⁷

Land was our Nietzsche—with the same baiting of the so-called progressive tendencies, the same bizarre mixture of the reactionary and the futuristic, and a writing style that updates nineteenth-century aphorisms into what Kodwo Eshun called 'text at sample velocity.' Speed—in the abstract and the chemical sense—was crucial here: telegraphic tech-punk provocations replacing the conspicuous cogitation of so much post-structuralist continentalism, with its implication that the more laborious and agonised the writing, the more thought must be going on.

7. N. Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings* (Falmouth and New York: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2010), 341–2; embedded quotations from Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 239, 321).

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Whatever the merits of Land's other theoretical provocations (and I'll suggest some serious problems with them presently), Land's withering assaults on the academic left—or the embourgeoisified state-subsidised grumbling that so often calls itself academic Marxism—remain trenchant. The unwritten rule of these 'careerist sandbaggers' is that no one seriously expects any renunciation of bourgeois subjectivity to ever happen. *Pass the Merlot, I've got a career's worth of quibbling critique to get through.* So we see a ruthless protection of petit-bourgeois interests dressed up as politics. Papers about antagonism, then all off to the pub afterwards. Instead of this, Land took earnestly—to the point of psychosis and auto-induced schizophrenia—the Spinozist-Nietzschean-Marxist injunction that a theory should not be taken seriously if it remains at the level of representation.

What, then, is Land's philosophy about?

In a nutshell: Deleuze and Guattari's machinic desire remorselessly stripped of all Bergsonian vitalism, and made backwards-compatible with Freud's death drive and Schopenhauer's Will. The Hegelian-Marxist motor of history is then transplanted into this pulsional nihilism: the idiotic autonomic Will no longer circulating on the spot, but upgraded into a drive, and guided by a quasi-teleological artificial intelligence attractor that draws terrestrial history over a series of intensive thresholds that have no eschatological point of consummation, and that reach empirical termination only contingently if and when its material substrate burns out. This is Hegelian-Marxist historical materialism inverted: Capital will not be ultimately unmasked as exploited labour power; rather, humans are the meat puppet of Capital, their identities and self-understandings are simulations that can and will be ultimately be sloughed off.

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Two more text samples establish the narrative:

Emergent Planetary Commercium trashes the Holy Roman Empire, the Napoleonic Continental System, the Second and Third Reich, and the Soviet International, cranking-up world disorder through compressing phases. Deregulation and the state arms-race each other into cyberspace.⁸

It is ceasing to be a matter of how we think about technics, if only because technics is increasingly thinking about itself. It might still be a few decades before artificial intelligences surpass the horizon of biological ones, but it is utterly superstitious to imagine that the human dominion of terrestrial culture is still marked out in centuries, let alone in some metaphysical perpetuity. The high road to thinking no longer passes through a deepening of human cognition, but rather through a becoming inhuman of cognition, a migration of cognition out into the emerging planetary technosentience reservoir, into 'dehumanized landscapes...emptied spaces' where human culture will be dissolved.⁹

This is—quite deliberately—theory as cyberpunk fiction: Deleuze-Guattari's concept of capitalism as the virtual unnameable Thing that haunts all previous formations pulp-welded to the time-bending of the *Terminator* films: 'what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources,' as 'Machinic Desire' has it.¹⁰ Capital as megadeath-drive as Terminator:

8. Land, 'Meltdown', *Fanged Noumena*, 441.

9. Land, 'Circuitries', *Fanged Noumena*, 293. This volume, 255.

10. *Fanged Noumena*, 338.

that which 'can't be bargained with, can't be reasoned with, doesn't show pity or remorse or fear and absolutely will not stop, ever'. Land's piratings of *Terminator*, *Blade Runner* and the *Predator* films made his texts part of a convergent tendency—an accelerationist cyberculture in which digital sonic production disclosed an inhuman future that was to be relished rather than abominated. Land's machinic theory-poetry paralleled the digital intensities of goth jungle, techno and doomcore, which sampled from exactly the same cinematic sources, and also anticipated 'impending human extinction becom[ing] accessible as a dance-floor'.¹¹

What does this have to do with the Left? Well, for one thing Land is the kind of antagonist that the Left needs. If Land's cyber-futurism can seem out of date, it is only in the same sense that jungle and techno are out of date—not because they have been superseded by new futurisms, but because the future as such has succumbed to retrospection. The actual near future wasn't about Capital stripping off its latex mask and revealing the machinic death's head beneath; it was just the opposite: New Sincerity, Apple Computers advertised by kitschy-cutesy pop. This failure to foresee the extent to which pastiche, recapitulation and a hyper-oedipalised neurotic individualism would become the dominant cultural tendencies is not a contingent error; it points to a fundamental misjudgement about the dynamics of capitalism. But this does not legitimate a return to the quill pens and powdered wigs of the eighteenth-century bourgeois revolution, or to the endlessly restaged logics of failure of May '68, neither of which have any purchase on the political and libidinal terrain in which we are currently embedded.

While Land's cybergothic remix of Deleuze and Guattari is in so many respects superior to the original, his deviation from their

11. *Ibid.*, 398.

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understanding of capitalism is fatal. Land collapses capitalism into what Deleuze and Guattari call schizophrenia, thus losing their most crucial insight into the way that capitalism operates via simultaneous processes of deterritorialization and compensatory reterritorialization. Capital's human face is not something that it can eventually set aside, an optional component or sheath-cocoon with which it can ultimately dispense. The abstract processes of decoding that capitalism sets off must be contained by improvised archaisms, lest capitalism cease being capitalism. Similarly, markets may or may not be the self-organising meshworks described by Fernand Braudel and Manuel DeLanda, but what is certain is that capitalism, dominated by quasi-monopolies such as Microsoft and Wal-Mart, is an anti-market. Bill Gates promises business at the speed of thought, but what capitalism delivers is thought at the speed of business. A simulation of innovation and newness that cloaks inertia and stasis.

For precisely these reasons, accelerationism can function as an anti-capitalist strategy—not the only anti-capitalist strategy, but a strategy that must be part of any political program that calls itself Marxist. The fact that capitalism tends towards stagflation, that growth is in many respects illusory, is all the more reason that accelerationism can function in a way that Alex Williams characterises as 'terroristic'. What we are not talking about here is the kind of intensification of exploitation that a kneejerk socialist humanism might imagine when the spectre of accelerationism is invoked. As Lyotard suggests, the left subsiding into a moral critique of capitalism is a hopeless betrayal of the anti-identitarian futurism that Marxism must stand for if it is to mean anything at all. What we need, as Fredric Jameson—the author of 'Wal-Mart as Utopia'—argues, is now a new move beyond good and evil, and this, Jameson says, is to be found in none other than the *Communist Manifesto*. 'The Manifesto,' Jameson writes, 'proposes to see capitalism as the most productive

moment of history and the most destructive at the same time, and issues the imperative to think Good and Evil simultaneously, and as inseparable and inextricable dimensions of the same present of time. This is then a more productive way of transcending Good and Evil than the cynicism and lawlessness which so many readers attribute to the Nietzschean program.¹² Capitalism has abandoned the future because it can't deliver it. Nevertheless, the contemporary Left's tendencies towards Canutism, its rhetoric of resistance and obstruction, collude with capital's anti/meta-narrative that it is the only story left standing. Time to leave behind the logics of failed revolts, and to think ahead again.

12. F. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), 551.