

CHAPTER 10

Phantasmagoria and the Trump Opera

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It should now be self-evident that internet technologies are not going to usher in a new Renaissance, end ignorance, or whatever other fantasies optimists may have attached to the idea of the Global Village. The essence of technology remains the same as it has since industrialization first began. In the wake of the 2016 US Presidential Election, the challenge of image projection technology (i.e., television or any internet gadget and the software that powers it) – the way in which it represents the world, and the influence it has on our perception of the real – has once again become an issue similar to the challenge addressed in Plato’s Cave: the challenge of illusions projected over the real.

In this chapter, to examine the way our present reality is altered by a specific technology in the present communications environment, I identify dangerous molecules of image projection apparatuses, and relate them to the pre-twentieth century theatre of phantasmagoria which maintained popularity across Europe and the United States for more than two centuries before the advent of cinema. Phantasmagoria became a metaphor used originally by Marx, and later by Walter Benjamin and T.W. Adorno, to address matters of consumer culture and illusion. Overlaying Adorno’s analysis of the phantasmagoria found in Wagnerian music dramas onto the social media eco-system that gave rise to Trump, I find similarities of affect in the elemental particles unique to each spectacle. In other words, the feelings one gets from following the rise of authoritarian populists through social media feeds (such as Trump’s) is similar

How to cite this book chapter:

Muelrath, F. 2018. Phantasmagoria and the Trump Opera. In: Morelock, J. (ed.) *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*. Pp. 229–247. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book30.k>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND

to feelings one might experience while in the audience of Wagner's *Die Ring des Nibelungen*, *Parsifal*, *Tristan*, and so on – artistic creations noted by philosophers such as Nietzsche and Adorno to be full of narcissism, trickery and deceit, which enraptures audience members by making Others out of them and taking over the body with the physical sensations generated by theatre, illusion, and music. I present here a structure for understanding the collective psychosis of social media phantasmagorias in the time of Trump, such as the Pizzagate conspiracy theory and the gun-violence that resulted from it. Because of the relative obscurity of both opera and the pre-cinema 'theatre of phantasmagoria,' I will begin by explaining both.

10.1. The Magic Lantern

The etymology of 'phantasmagoria' relates back to an obsolete type of theatre based around the pre-cinema image projection apparatus known as a 'magic lantern.' Therefore, before proceeding to an understanding of Adorno and Benjamin's use of 'phantasmagoria,' and how the concept remains relevant as technology progresses, some history of pre-cinema image projection apparatuses must be laid-out.

For two millennia or more the entire human understanding of projected images consisted of a natural phenomenon that occurs when light passes through a pin sized hole into a darkened area and forms an upside-down image on an opposing surface, known as 'camera obscura.' This phenomenon was registered in writing as early as Aristotle's *Problemata* (350BC), where the author notes that rays of sun passing through wickerwork form circles of light rather than rectangles (Book XV, 463). There was little technology developed around image projection until the sixteenth century when a biconvex lens was placed in front of the camera obscura's aperture, which allowed for the projection of a more distinct image – albeit still upside-down – on an opposing wall. This effect was typically achieved in a darkened room with a tiny hole in one wall, and on the opposite wall an image of the outside world would appear.

A lens attached to the camera obscura's aperture marks the beginning of the industrialization of image projection. Within a century, the magic lantern was invented by Dutch scientist, Christiaan Huygens, and its popularity lasted until the advent of cinema (Mannoni and Crangle 2015). Of all image projection apparatuses yet invented, the magic lantern has thus far sustained popularity longer than any other, and it is the true predecessor of film projectors found in present day movie houses.

A box constructed of sheet metal or wood, housing a gas lantern with a set of mirrors and lenses designed to send images outward, the magic lantern is able to project moving images of painted slides on to a screen. Two or three lenses are often stacked on top of one another, which allows for a background to be

projected with moving images superimposed. Animation of the images became possible with technological advances.

As foreign as the magic lantern might seem to us in the digital age, the essence of image projection remains the same since the industrialization of the apparatus began. The desire to project images on a screen, and the way audiences are affected does not change, and even the warp and woof of narrative content remains relatively stable. What does change are the mechanics of this technology – from sunlight through a hole in the wall, to virtual reality headsets and beyond. The progression of mechanics must not complicate our basic relationship to image projection technology, as it moves forward at greater and greater speeds with no sign that this progression will be hindered on the marketplace. We exist in relation to the image projection apparatus' mechanical progression from now into the unforeseeable future.

At the time of its invention in the mid-seventeenth century, many spectators would have been baffled by the images projected on the wall by magic lanterns, and those not in the know would have likely been spooked thinking that they were witnessing a supernatural event. For maximum effect, the apparatus was often hidden from view, and the content of the spectacle often consisted of diabolical and erotic imagery. When more complex theatre was developed around the magic lantern that involved music, actors, and sound effects to go along with the image projections, it was given the name 'phantasmagoria' – from the Greek *phantasma* meaning 'image, phantom, apparition,' and *agora* meaning 'assembly': an assembly of phantoms (Mannoni and Crangle 2015). Or if we would like to consider phantasmagoria from a contemporary psychoanalytic perspective, we could think of it as an assembly of phantasms – an assembly of perceptual patterns that will inevitably inform the subject's worldview.

10.2. Phantasmagoria

Phantasmagoria is where image projection intersects with Critical Theory. When Benjamin and Adorno use the term – as they do at several key points¹ – they are referring to a passage from Karl Marx's *Capital* (1867/1976). Marx uses the term as metaphor when discussing social relationships around the production of the 'mysterious character of the commodity form' in the first chapter of *Capital*, 'The Commodity' (163). According to Marx, as materials are produced into commodities they take on 'supra-sensible' characteristics related to the social aspects of labour, and the market value of the object is further distanced from the use value of the original material—wood to wooden table for instance, the table imbued with a mysterious character beyond the original material. Marx relates this separation to a trick of the eye, 'the phantasmagoric form of a relation of things.'² Phantasmagoria – a hallucinatory state that puts stress on the human brain, nerves, muscles and sense organs – is where a fetish

attaches itself to the products of labour, with the true value of that labour occluded from the subject.

Walter Benjamin relied on the phantasmagoria metaphor heavily in his *Arcade's Project*: 'Our investigation proposes to show how ... the new forms of behaviour and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria,' he writes in the *Arcades Project* introduction (Benjamin 2013, 14). Benjamin develops the metaphor to a place all on its own, fusing the Marxist elements with a Freudian reading of nineteenth-century commercialization. For him, all of Paris in the nineteenth century is a phantasmagoria, the *flâneur* is carried from one commodity to the next, in a never-ending dream-like state. An analogy could be drawn to today's typical internet user clicking through webpages.

Benjamin cites his interlocutor T.W. Adorno at several points in his discussion of phantasmagoria: e.g. (phantasmagoria is) 'a consumer item in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us how it came into being. It becomes a magical object, insofar as the labor stored up in it comes to seem supernatural and sacred at the very moment when it can no longer be recognized as labor' (669).³

Adorno returned to phantasmagoria at several points throughout his writing life, but it is in an essay on the performance of Wagner's operas in late nineteenth century Bayreuth that his thoughts most relate to the present day communications environment. Here Adorno describes how the occultation of labour allows Wagner's characters to function 'as universal symbols' dissolving into the phantasmagorical mist created by the production. The influence of Wagnerian opera on the audience relates symbolically, psychically and physiologically to techniques used in the rise of Trump and other authoritarian populists working on social media.

10.3. Wagner

It is amusing to imagine Nietzsche in the last two years of his writing life, tortured by the physiological effects of Wagner's operas. 'How terribly Wagnerian orchestration affects me!' Nietzsche writes in *The Case of Wagner*, 'A disagreeable sweat breaks out all over me. All my fine weather vanishes' (Nietzsche 1964, 8). Bela Tarr's excellent film, *The Turin Horse*, brings in part this little narrative to life: the philosopher finishes his final completed essay, a promulgation against Wagner titled *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, penning the lines 'But do not my stomach, my heart, my circulation also protest? Are not my intestines also trouble?' (Nietzsche 1964, 59). And then walking out into the street he sees a stranger beating a horse – the last pummelling the philosopher's senses could bear before collapsing on the ground never to recover his sanity.

Nietzsche's 'physiology of art' – an attempt to analyse aesthetics by their influence on biology – was never fully developed, and for the most part has been

ignored by those who have followed him – for instance, Heidegger labelled such attempts a ‘fatal misunderstanding’ (Heidegger 1981, 127). In the digital world, where smartphone and internet addiction are increasingly talked about, the influence aesthetics have on our physiology are perhaps more relevant than they were in the early twentieth century. This can be evidenced by the increasing amount of psychological research that has gone into internet and smart phone addiction over the past five years (Walton 2017).

New multimedia spectacle targets audiences using data collection and algorithms, feeding content that, shock, amuse, or please a specific user’s sensibilities. These methods are often occluded – besides the fact that many of us are aware that our online activities are being influenced by algorithms, most ignore it, clicking through a series of mildly affecting pages, while being unconsciously influenced by those who are tracking our activity. The occultation of production is something the digital world excels at, which is one essential link between the image projection apparatuses of the digital world, and that of phantasmagoria’s magic lantern.

In his book on Wagner, Adorno opens his essay titled ‘Phantasmagoria’ by stating: ‘The occultation of production by means of the outward appearance of the product – that is the formal law governing the works of Richard Wagner’ (Adorno 2009, 74). The English translator of *In Search of Wagner*, Rodney Livingston, makes a note here, linking Adorno’s usage of ‘phantasmagoria’ back to the commodity chapter in Marx’s *Capital Volume 1*, writing, ‘In this chapter, [phantasmagoria’s] negative connotations stem from Marx’s use of the word to describe commodity fetishism’ (74). With Wagner the phantasmagoria also takes flight into territory that Marx barely touched upon but did allude to in the first chapter of *Capital 1* – ‘into the misty realm of religion.’ Or to borrow Marx’s phrasing in the opening lines of the section titled ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret’: ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.’

In the context of Wagner, this misty realm of religion is manifest in the larger than life characters that populate his operas. Sometimes these characters represent actual religion, like with the Norse gods of the *Ring Cycle*, or in historical fiction like the *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. For the audience, in both cases the affect is similar – a character comes to life on stage that is relatable beyond the normal comprehension of space and time, a psychological and emotional effect that, if achieved to the artist’s full desire, has the ability to overtake the body and replace one’s own feelings, thoughts and memories, with that of the composer’s. This is the goal of ‘*gesamtkunstwerk*’ – a word Wagner used to describe his desire for a total work of art that affects all of the senses.

Adorno writes that ‘The only reason why Wagner’s characters can function as universal symbols, is that they dissolve in phantasmagoria like the mist’ (78). He details many tricks that Wagner used to create phantasmagoria, in music, drama and scenery:

Brünnhilde too is detached from time, sleeping like Kundry, in the abruptly invoked phantasmagoria of the magic fire – the dominant

phantasmagoria of the *Ring* and the one from which, musically, the image of the twilight of the Gods is ultimately derived. While the manner of its production is completely concealed in its string sections, harmonically, its progression is most ingeniously that of a state of rest. Not only do the constant harmonic changes produce new progressions; at the same time, systematic modulation through the changing surfaces of the different keys makes the music dance round the basic harmonies which remain constant at any given moment, like a fire that perpetually flickers without ever moving from the spot. As a metaphor for fire, the final 60 bars of *The Valkyrie* provide crucial insight into the nature of phantasmagoria (78).

For Adorno, the elements of Wagner's phantasmagorias are functioning on many levels at the same time; the concealment of harmonic progression in an alluring string section, for example, is not often going to be considered by the audience when accompanied by Wagnerian drama on the stage:

The absence of any real harmonic progression becomes the phantasmagorical emblem for time standing still. Tannhäuser says in the *Venusberg*:

*The time I dwell here with thee, by days I cannot measure, seasons
pass me, how, I scarcely know,
— the radiant sun I see no longer, strange hath become the
heaven's starry splendor —
the sweet verdure of spring, the gentle token of earths renewing
life.*

The standing-still of time and the complete occultation of nature by means of phantasmagoria are thus brought together in the memory of a pristine age where time is guaranteed only by the stars. Time is the all-important element of production that phantasmagoria, the mirage of eternity, obscures. (71)⁴

With the drama and the music functioning in tandem with one another, the psychosexual grinds on the unconscious, at times in ways not even realized by the libretto's author:

In a regression familiar from the process of bourgeois education and known to psychoanalysis as 'syphilophobia', sex and sexual disease become identical. It is no accident that one of Wagner's objections to vivisection was that the knowledge gleaned from such experimentation might lead to the curing of diseases that had been contracted through 'vice.' The conversion of pleasure into sickness is the denunciatory task

of phantasmagoria. If two of the Wagnerian phantasmagorias, the *Venusberg* and Klingsor's enchanted garden, are reminiscent of dreamland brothels, these are simultaneously calumniated as places that no one can leave unscathed. (83)

Psychosexual transgressions are of course a major element in the overall effect of Trump and other aspiring authoritarian populists in the contemporary American movement, with the 'grab 'em by the pussy' type of scenes, and the seemingly endless accusations of sexual misconduct – events, as with Wagner, likely to further enrapture audiences while ironically offering a position of moral authority even while promoting debased or erotic material.

Related to Marx's ocular metaphor, with the concealment of the opera's labour, the audience's subjectivity is reflected in the fantasy of what is at work in the production – enraptured by the stage drama, feeling the music, unconsciously processing the sexual – none of the operatics requiring a level of virtuosity that the average opera fan cannot fantasize performing herself. It is in the amalgam of fantasies about the production of opera, and fantasies caused by the opera's affect, that phantasmagoria takes hold. Adorno explains it in terms of dreams:

The phantasmagoria tends towards dream not merely as the deluded wish-fulfillment of would-be buyers, but chiefly to conceal the labour that has gone into making it. It mirrors subjectivity by confronting the subject with the product of its own labour, but in such a way that the labour that has gone into it is no longer identifiable. The dreamer encounters his own image impotently, as if it were a miracle, and is held fast in the inexorable circle of his own labour, as if it would last forever. The object that he has forgotten he has made is dangled magically before his eyes, as if it were an absolutely objective manifestation. (80)

Likewise, Trump's character is able to function in the media in an abusive, authoritarian manner beyond normalcy when phantasmagoria is created by an occultation of production – social media's phantasmagoria. Through these new operatics, Trump becomes representative of the 'collectively, monstrously enlarged projection of the impotent ego of each' audience member witnessing his social media opera (Adorno and Horkheimer 1947/2016, 196).

To those of us on the Left, watching from a supposed enlightened perspective, the Trump character comes crashing clumsily onto the stage, unaware of his own follies and narcissism. He is a character akin to perhaps Wotan in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* – the king of the gods who coerces and dominates those around him, using a magical law-making spear to retain power. In the end, Wotan entangles himself in his own deceptive plots, his spear is unwittingly shattered by his mortal grandson, and the gods meet their demise as Valhalla is

consumed by flames. From a supposed enlightened position – with Trump in the role of a buffoonish leader to the last generation of his kind – it is relieving to imagine the king's reign coming to end as he is met with a fire as destructive as the one that annihilated the Hall of the Gods. It is self-evident that many liberals in America are watching the Robert Mueller investigative probe into Russian interference of the 2016 election, imagining that it will bring a fire that could destroy Valhalla. The destructive desire (the Freudian *Todestrieb*) is common in opera as well as fascism as made evident by Klaus Theweleit's (1987) and in Trumpian populism. However, the hope that Trump's rise will meet a fiery end is only the perspective of the enlightened crowd sitting in the opera's audience. Being that the rise of Trump is occurring within the hallowed American electoral system, more positions than the enlightened one need to be considered before we can come to terms with how those on the Left have been hornswoggled into participating in a system that elected an aspiring authoritarian, despite a supposed pedagogy.

Any of us who follow the Trump opera, whether the Trumpian character represents hero or villain, has been captured in the phantasmagoria in one of three positions, which I borrow from media theorist, Tom Gunning, and his lucid analysis of phantasmagoria and early cinema: (1) *the pedagogical and enlightened*, (2) *the faithful and authoritarian*, and (3) *the magician-illusionist*. To understand those three positions we can imagine a darkened room in the early nineteenth Century.

10.4. Optical Illusions

An audience gathers to witness a new type of theatre that promises 'astonishing appearances by [...] optical and mechanical illusions [...] PHANTOMS or APPARITIONS of the DEAD [...] in a way more completely illusive than has ever been offered in the eye of the public theatre.'⁵ The audience sits in anticipation as ethereal music begins to play on a glass harmonica, an actor screams off-stage, and an image of a shadowy figure appears on the wall – a demon growing inexplicably larger, as if it is approaching through a portal that is opened up in the wall. Some in the audience will be familiar with phantasmagorias and have expected the illusion. Others will be completely in the dark, left gasping and screaming with fear, likely to the amusement of those experienced with the phantasmagoric effects.

As Tom Gunning points out, the magic lantern came into existence near the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, and one of its selling points was its ability to function as a sort of philosophical toy, aiding in contemplation of illusions. Early in its existence during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some practitioners may have been able to sell their magic lantern shows as ghost-raising séances, but by the nineteenth century popular phantasmagorias needed to appeal to audience with more scientific awareness. As is

evident in the advertisement quoted above, the practitioner was often forthcoming with the fact that the spectacle was created by ‘optical and mechanical illusions.’

Gunning structures three different *receptions, practices* and *understandings* surrounding visual illusions in the post-Enlightenment era. If applied to our phantasmagoria metaphor concerning social media, this structure is useful for understanding the reception of illusions of the image projection apparatuses that we use today. Here are Gunning’s three categories paraphrased (Gunning 2004, 40):

1. The *pedagogical and enlightened* explain the mechanisms of the illusion. Thus the illusion itself is dissolved in favour of its explanatory function about the nature of perception and light.
2. The *faithful and authoritarian* demonstrate not so much the working of perception as its inherent fallibility, the untrustworthy nature of human senses and consciousness in need of a transcendent faith to make sense of the world.
3. The *magician-illusionist* invokes neither faith nor science, but entertainment. The magician would announce that the illusion was not dependent on supernatural forces, and could be explained in terms of natural forces. However, unlike the Enlightenment pedagogue, the magician withholds the explanation, and delivers no debunking demonstration. Instead, he or she leaves spectators suspended in their uncertainty, doubting what they have just seen yet unable to deny or thoroughly explain it. In this suspense dwells the entertaining pleasure of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Each of the three categories lends itself to phantasmagoria’s affect. Neither a pedagogic exposé of the mechanism, nor a transcendent faith inhibits the subject’s fantasizes about the spectacle – this should be evident by the way many endure a physiological responses brought on by the stresses of fear and anxiety while watching a horror film, even after being exposed to the techniques of special effects artists. Gunning writes, ‘Optical illusions form a complex figure, whose power may not lie primarily in the ability to fool someone into taking them for “reality”. Rather they confound habitual attitudes towards perception, indeed sowing doubts about the nature of reality’ (Gunning 2004, 40). I would add that having the three structures functioning within the audience at the same time, lends itself to the subject’s further confusion about objective reality, and we should expect that he or she may be inclined towards any of the three positions at various points.

In understanding the phantasmagorias of Trump, we should consider for a moment the way the image projection apparatus has evolved. Today our image projection apparatuses consist of an amorphous set of what philosopher Villem Flusser would call ‘automatic machines’ – apparatuses that obey an arbitrary

program (Flusser 2014, 83). Arbitrary programs dominate the average user's digital life – these manifest as things like camera phones, spell check software, the numerous rules governing each social media platform, and so on. Automatic machines have made it easier for all people to create spectacle at the sort of pitch of Wagnerian drama with just a few taps on their cell phone. And each one of these programs creates a further occultation of labour. Flusser's makes the following prophetic observation in his 1983 book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: 'human labor is being replaced by automatic machines and most of society is starting to be employed in the "tertiary sector," i.e., playing with empty symbols; the existential interests of the material world are being replaced by symbolic universes and the values of things are being replaced by information. Our thoughts, feelings, desires and actions are being robotized; "life" is coming to mean feeding apparatuses and being fed by them' (79).

The operatic tools available for the populist social media campaign are numerous – perhaps infinite given the way the speed of development has surpassed the speed of user adaptation in the last two decades. For example, everything from the development of blogging platforms that allow fresh ways to excite participants, to the way data is collected and algorithms are manipulated by campaigns or third-party actors, can be used as tools to raise the tenor of the otherwise mundane process of electoral progress up to the fever-pitch of high operatic drama needed to ignite the type of zealous fanaticism that can support a character like Trump. In addition, the 'monstrously enlarged projection of the impotent ego of each individual' is aided by independent supporters, as well as detractors, firing off automatic machines all hours of the day.

10.5. Fake News

Let us home in on a single operatic technique used in the Trump opera, occupying the pedagogical and enlightened position in today's phantasmagoria by examining journalism.

The occultation of labour, brought on by the automatic machines of digital publishing, left newsreaders with a harrowing disconnect between the impression made by a news article on the optic nerve, and the material essence of that article outside the eye.⁶ In traditional news sources, the resources and labour that went into production were clearer. With the advent of digital publishing in the last decade, much of the labour that went into the production of the newspaper was suddenly occluded as the newspaper digitalized. Now the creation of news source in the digital age – such as Breitbart, Buzzfeed, or InfoWars – can access many of the same media tools at extremely low-costs, that are being used by traditional news sources, such as the *New York Times* or broadcast television. The labour that previously went into the production of traditional news sources was once specialized, but it has since become generic. The labour that previously went into printing newspapers or shooting live TV now largely takes

place in tech industries, or in mineral mines from which the materials used to build gadgets are extracted.

Sociologist Christian Fuchs, in his extensive Marxian analysis of digital media, defines the term *digital labour*: ‘Digital labour is alienated digital work: it is alienated from itself, from the instruments and objects of labour and from the products of labour’ (Fuchs 2014, 351). In these terms, in today’s media landscape the newspaper, and in turn journalists, are now beholden to corporate social media companies. What news items get consumed is now largely dependent on either 1) the algorithms of social media sites such as Facebook, which dictate what is shown based on formulas that maximize potential benefits for social media corporations in user engagement and advertising; or 2) through the ‘slave labourers’ of the social media companies – essentially any user who generates and shares content which engages other users. The result of this is pressure to create content that will travel further and generate more impressions or ‘clicks,’ and in turn, ad revenue. News organizations are forced to comply with these new methods of circulation in attempt to meet the demands of the social media corporations.

Meanwhile, new competition – such as the authoritarian populist pro-Trump propaganda blog Breitbart – excels at meeting the demands of the new market, by producing content that has the external appearance of traditional journalism, but in reality is nothing more than political rabble-rousing tailored to reach the widest audience of right-wing new consumers. What is frightening is that in less than a decade Breitbart has managed to come in direct competition with news sources that practise actual journalism. Breitbart has achieved this by employing a number of illusory techniques, such as blog comments generated by bots, as well as bots spreading Breitbart articles through social media, motivated by an ideology based on a dogmatic belief in a fallacious historical analysis which informs that in order to return to a Post-WWII conservative culture in the United States, a crisis must be brought on by a destructive global leader. This historical analysis is laid out in Steve Bannon’s idiotic film, *The Fourth Turning*.

With the compounded alienation of the labour of journalism that has come about with digitization comes an opening for swarms of reports that adopt the appearance of actual journalism and appear to represent actual events, but are, in fact, propaganda. This occurs not only in the creation of the content on right-wing fake news sites, but also across social platforms that spread the content, often through bots that are funded by associates of Bannon and Trump. The concealment of labour occurring everywhere from the mineral mines of gadget companies, to the software developers that create programs to replace copyeditors and other traditional jobs in the publishing industry, has enabled propagandists to produce a commodity with affect and optics similar to traditional journalism. Here, the phantasmagoria in Marx’s metaphor comes very close to the theatre of phantasmagoria, in that actual visual illusions are being created by illusionists and alienated labourers in order to fool an audience.

Many of those who consume news do not think of this economic shift when engaged with the content, and the propagandists and conspiracy theorists retain some of the authority that traditional news sources spent a century accumulating under much different conditions of production and circulation. The ultimate end of the shift away from traditional newspaper or television production has thus far been the phenomenon of ‘fake news’ – items made to look like actual journalism and circulated by automatic machines. Fake news is a paramount example of a Trump phantasmagoria.

At the time of this writing there has been no pedagogical institution appropriated to dispel the illusion of fake news – we do not yet know if Trump contributed to the production of fake news that helped his campaign succeed, for instance, because we do not have the ability to perceive a truth one way or the other with the naked eye. This journalistic phantasmagoria, in fact, encourages limitless fantasies of what may be behind the production of fake news, which opportunists are using to their advantage in the discrediting of opponents.

10.5.1. *Pizzagate*

Using a specific instance of fake news – a horror scene in the Trump opera that managed to tear itself out of the digital world and into real life – we can apply Tom Gunning’s three categories of reception, practice, and understanding of phantasmagoria.

The Pizzagate conspiracy reached its zenith when a man who believed in the illusion walked into the Washington, DC, Comet Ping Pong pizzeria with an assault rifle and fired shots. The Pizzagate conspiracy theory, which spread online in the run-up to the 2016 Election, claimed that Hillary Clinton and other Democrats participated in an international paedophilic human trafficking ring that operated out of the pizza shop. This rumour began on a single Twitter account – the operator of which is unknown. The Twitter user claimed in a tweet that the NYPD was looking into evidence that Democrats, including Clinton, were involved in an international sex trafficking ring. The Tweet went viral among Trump supporters, which led to many websites posing as news publications to produce content about the conspiracy theory. At the time of this writing, there have been 1,744,557 Twitter posts using the hashtag #pizzagate.

Referring back to Gunning’s structure of three different receptions, practices and understandings, we can analyse the Pizzagate phantasmagoria in this way:

1. *The pedagogical and enlightened*: this group is aware of the mechanisms of the illusion, thus the illusion dissolves while the participants are able to use it as a philosophical toy in order to contemplate ‘the nature of light.’ The BuzzFeed article I referenced to develop my synopsis of Pizzagate is an example of this category.⁷ Those that are practising the illusion pedagogically are explaining the mechanisms of the illusion to others, as

they are performing it. The audience believes they are privy to knowledge and more profound wisdom than those in the other categories. Being in the enlightened category does not release one from phantasmagoria – fantasies still rise in the space between the optic impressions of the fake journalism and the material essence of specific journalistic pieces. In the Pizzagate scenario, pedagogical practitioners have not yet been able to fully dispel the illusions, because digital traces that would lead back to the original propagator of the rumour have been effaced. FBI digital forensic experts are supposedly investigating illusions like Pizzagate; meanwhile the authoritarian populists march forward. If the pedagogical wish is to remain ‘enlightened,’ those in this group must subject themselves to the constant bombardment of the senses by the phantasmagoria, while any contribution they make to online discussions further fuels the collective psychosis of those that truly believe that Pizzagate is real.

2. *The faithful and authoritarian:* the morality of phantasmagoria is untethered to its significant objects will attach itself, almost at random, to new objects that come floating through the mist. Displaced phantasmagoric morality carries over not only the emotional inertia enjoyed in its prior moral object, but also various cathected signifiers loosened from their prior context of cathexis. The speed at which image projection apparatuses have developed has caused major disruptions in the symbolic register, as unique inner experience that was previously obscure is now easily projected outward by nearly any individual, creating a schizoid moral environment. The Pizzagate mass hysteria began due to the illusion of a moral crisis. In the frantic response of the faithful, the formation of a new metaphysics began in language detached from objective reality by the internet. In such conditions, faith is lost in traditional understandings of a shared reality. And if the illusion is revealed to the faithful by way of proving the conspiracy theory false, the untethered and free floating phantasmagoric morality will be displaced into another area, such as the fervour surrounding the authoritarian populist. For the faithful, much like with early magic lantern shows, fake news has led to distrust in the human senses, and proof that consciousness needs transcendent faith to make sense of the world. It is easy to see how the authoritarian populist Trump has used this moral untethering to his advantage by posing as an authority on fake news.
3. *The magician-illusionist* of Pizzagate is anyone willing to knowingly propagate the false Pizzagate rumour with the intent of deception. Bloggers posing as journalists benefit from this deception through a range of ways – advertising revenue, political agenda, career advancement, narcissistic desire, and so on. Many of us are guilty of holding Pizzagate in suspension as we consume it for the sake of comedy and horror. Politicians may use deception for their campaigns. Individuals benefit from trickery in many solipsistic and perverse ways. The trickster remains an archetype and requires no other reason to exist aside from fulfilling his role.

The three categories thrive in symbiosis: the authoritarian is strengthened by imposing her moral code on the enlightened. The enlightened gains power by exposing the magician's tricks. And the magician is energized by entertaining the faithful with his magic show. All are being fed by the automatic machines of the digital communications environment, working ceaselessly, powered by capitalistic poaching of our biological energy through activities often perceived as benign, such as clicking on news articles. Despite moral outrage about illusions disrupting consensus concerning objective reality, the social media companies will not, in earnest, hinder the ecosystem, due to viral traffic increasing market-value.⁸

Indeed, the psychosexual drama of Pizzagate is similar to the central phantasmagoria in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. The two plots share an element of radical transgression that suspends all socio-symbolic links in favour of a transcendent pleasure surplus beyond what can be represented – in *Tristan* an illicit love affair that arose out of mix-up between suicide elixir and a love potion, and in Pizzagate, a gesturing towards an international pedophile sex orgy where the occulted pleasures of villains are indulged. Both plots can end in only one satisfactory way: complete obliteration of primary characters from the symbolic order. In *Tristan* this is represented by a song known as the *Liebestod* (love-death) sung with Isolde's last breath. In Pizzagate, for those who continue to indulge in the illusion, the suspension of disbelief is maintained by the impossible resolution of the villains' imprisonment and forever banished from political life once and for all. This tendency towards destruction in nineteenth-century opera has already been psychoanalyzed to death by critics with a Freudian bent (see Žižek and Dolar 2002, Tambling 2010, or Blanchot 2013). Just because the drama is occurring in new media, rather than with the theatrical illusions of the nineteenth century opera house, the effect should not be expected to diminish. Rather, we should be more concerned about potential effect, as the lines between reality and fiction are less clear when the illusionists are working on personal computers, rather than a stage, and the participants are walking into pizza parlours with loaded weapons in search of the villain in the fictitious story.

Tristan und Isolde is well known for its harmonic intensity. The production opens with an uneasy chord that begs for resolution – a chord that represents such emotional heat in this particular piece of music that it has become known as the 'Tristan chord.' Wagner employs the Tristan chord in a leitmotiv that signifies the character, Tristan's entrance into a scene, each time tugging the ear towards a much-needed harmonic resolution. That resolution does not come until the *Liebestod* – for the entire three acts of Wagner's music drama, the audience suffers through an impossible love whose only logical conclusion is elimination from the symbolic order with discordant harmony wreaking havoc on the nerves, increasing the intensity and suspense of a looming erotic death.

With *Tristan*, the phantasmagoric spell is broken and the audience is released from the erotic horror when Isolde dies and the harmony finally resolves. With Pizzagate, the signifiers loosened from their context remain orbiting in the

phantasmagoric mist without resolution. Even if the subject is resolved in their belief that Pizzagate was in fact just an illusion, there remain traces of the phantasmagoria in the signifiers now displaced into other moral objects. There is an analogy to be drawn between this sort of phantasmagoria that exists on the internet and psychosis.

10.6. Writing-Down-System

The concern for the spread of conspiracy theories online has begun to gain the attention of psychologists in recent years, as the effects move beyond isolated instances of paranoia, and into our social and civic lives via electoral politics. However, the attempt of psychologists to identify a psychotic mechanism set in motion by a conspiracy theory that triggers a collective of online users millions strong, has thus far failed.⁹ This attempt to isolate a singular mechanism, such as illusory pattern perception – which could be subject to psychiatric treatment, or perhaps precipitate the creation of regulations that would prevent falsehoods from spreading through social media platforms – may at some point catch up to the technological development of image-making apparatuses at their current stage. But the technology will continue to develop at increasing rates, and it is doubtful that laws nor psychiatric treatment will be able to keep pace on the open market.

Rather than attempting to analyse and treat a collective of individual instances of paranoia by identifying the problem through controlled experiments, a structure for analysing online conspiracy theory content as if it is a singular psychotic subject, may provide valuable understanding at a pace that keeps up with technological developments. Lacan's elucidations on the psychotic structure – 'the strange juggler's game between the symbolic, the imaginary and the real' – in particular, provides some basis for understanding the *délire à deux* (delusions shared by two or more people) found on internet messaging boards (Lacan 1997, 47).

Within the language of the nearly two million Twitter posts using the hashtag #pizzagate, we can read a unified subject of the shared psychosis who has encountered a hole in the symbolic at a pivotal juncture. The signifying chain is interrupted when the subject is unable to signify aspects of their existence along the axes of metonymy and metaphor – loose associations are put in place of the absence. New Age murals of dragons and witches enacting pagan rituals on the walls of the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria are evidence of 'sinister individuals who don't mind flaunting their beliefs and (pedophilic) practices.'¹⁰ 'Cheese pizza' (CP) comes to stand for 'child pornography.' The shooting that occurred at the pizzeria is dismissed as a PsyOp campaign when it is discovered that the shooter has acting credits listed on IMDB. The signifiers coming to stand-in for meaning that is not otherwise attributed in the real, signals an absence of an anchoring signifier (the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father) and foreclosure. It will

be of no surprise that many believers in Pizzagate and other conspiracy theories that spread online have been diagnosed as schizophrenic.¹¹

Analysing the millions of subjects posting on the internet collectively, the Pizzagate phantasmagoria can be analysed as a single psychosis in three distinct stages that resemble Tom Gunning's three categories of reception, practice and understanding, taking into consideration that a psychotic subject is not often fully delusional until triggered. If we imagine all of the online Pizzagate content as a singular psychotic subject, those *pedagogical and enlightened* perspectives pointing out falsehood and defending truth, such as the BuzzFeed exposé mentioned above, resemble latent psychosis – these perspectives contribute to delusion by offering a supposed super-egoistic reasoning, while simultaneously willing to utter unanchored signifiers for the sake of relating to hallucinatory murmuring from a less visible part of the psyche – an hallucinatory murmuring that grows louder each time it is referred to by someone in a position of questioned authority such as the 'fake news media' (Trump's term for 'enlightened' perspectives in the media). *The magician-illusionists* are amoral producers of online content that is known to be false for the sake of collecting admissions fees to a cheap theatrical production.¹² Trump himself also frequently fills this role, profiting in political capital with his base. In producing illusions, these content producers don't project the psychotic delusions fully to the outside world themselves, but open the door for the subject to become a martyr of the unconscious and susceptible to full-on delusion. Lastly, those faithful authoritarians – the true believers of the conspiracy theory, and also those truly most likely to be in the throes of a schizophrenic psychotic break or a similar diagnosis recognized by American mental health professionals – irrepressibly babble signifiers detached from the Lacanian real and can be found in hoards on social media, following online illusionists such as Brietbart, InfoWars or Trump. This collective of individuals resemble a group in the throes of an episode of shared psychosis, with those former two categories of magician and pedagogue made up of typical neurotics experiencing delusions under the influence of a 'primary' psychotic, one who believes with certainty that something hallucinatory or otherwise delusory is truly happening.

Hence, the psychotic hive-mind's neural pathways are the image projection apparatus, and the phantasmagoric opera is fully automated and performing at all times inside of our pockets. We do not enter into a space to be entertained like nineteenth century consumers of phantasmagoria – we have a dependency developed over several years of ceaseless access to horror, comedy, and drama provoking *jouissance*, all of which, for the psychotic – who tend to eroticize everything while experiencing an episode – is irresistible.

The image projection apparatus now also includes most of writing – the 140 characters or less bursts of language, consumable with a glance, its parsing more like looking at photograph than reading a text. All of the authority that just twenty years ago was given to published text is – thanks to automatic

writing machines and occluded labour – just as accessible to one that wishes to contribute to a phantasmagoric shared psychosis, as it is to anyone else.

And the psychotics will write. For example we can look at a case well-known to psychoanalysts – that of Judge Daniel Paul Schreber. The late nineteenth century judge was forced to leave the bench after experiencing delusions in which he was the lover of God. Schreber developed his own language in order to talk to his sweetheart, which was partially communicated through the tweeting of birds and auditory hallucinations, as well as through writing. Schreber also wrote obsessively in notebooks during his delusional state, attempting to restructure the world according to his delusions in largely illegible or nonsensical scribbles, which he referred to as the ‘writing-down-system.’ After recovering from his illness, Schreber wrote in his memoirs about the experience: ‘I can only give the assurance that the writing-down-system became a mental torture, from which I suffered severely for years and to which I am only slowly getting a little accustomed; because of it, I had to endure trials of patience as they have probably never before had to be borne by a human being...’ (Schreber 2001, 128)

We must imagine the image projection apparatus as not any particular device, but as an object massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. To develop a methodology for dispelling phantasmagoric psychosis, psychoanalysis can be employed for understanding, and perhaps preventing further episodes – even if it is of little use in treating the current episode. If a methodology for understanding the phantasmagoric potentials of social media technology is not developed further, the threat that an authoritarian could capitalize on shared psychosis triggered by communications environments such as the present one and severely alter perceptions of reality en masse is all too apparent.

Notes

- ¹ The points key to this essay where Benjamin and Adorno use the phantasmagoria metaphor, are to be found in *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin), and *In Search of Wagner*, Chapter 6 (Adorno). Adorno’s translator, Rodney Livingston, refers to a work by Gillian Rose for a full discussion on the concept as used by the two theorists: *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, 30–31, 40–42, 47.
- ² My translation from *Capital Volume 1*, which in the original reads ‘welches hier für sie die phantasmagorische Form eines Verhältnisses von Dingen annimm.’ Tom Gunning points out that the phantasmagoria metaphor is likely lost on English speaking readers due to ‘phantasmagorische’ being translated as ‘fantasy.’
- ³ Originally referenced by Tom Gunning in *Illusions Past and Future: The Phantasmagoria and its Specters*.
- ⁴ Libretto quote is from *Tannhauser Act 1. Sc. 2*.
- ⁵ From an advert for Phantasmagoria in a British newspaper, *The Hull Advertiser and Exchange Gazette* – 5/8/1802.

- ⁶ Referring to *Capital Volume 1*: 'In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself. But, in the act of seeing, there is at all events, an actual passage of light from one thing to another, from the external object to the eye. There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things quâ commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom.'
- ⁷ Silverman, Craig. 'How The Bizarre Conspiracy Theory Behind 'Pizzagate' Was Spread.' BuzzFeed. December 5, 2016. Accessed 14 October 2017. https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/fever-swamp-election?utm_term=.srg4dp7RW#.bknPvgZOo.
- ⁸ See this NYT Op-ed by a former Facebook employee to further understand why we can't trust Facebook to prevent the spread of fake news: Parakilas, Sandy. 'We Can't Trust Facebook to Regulate Itself.' *The New York Times*, 19 November 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/11/19/opinion/facebook-regulation-incentive.html.
- ⁹ For a recent example of this type of psychological research, see van Prooijen J.-W., De Inocencio C., van Prooijen J.-W., Douglas K.M., and De Inocencio C. 2017. 'Connecting the dots: Illusory Pattern Perception Predicts Belief in Conspiracies and the Supernatural.' *European Journal of Social Psychology*.
- ¹⁰ More, Kristine, 'PIZZAGATE PAINTINGS: MODERN ART OR DISTURBING CLUES.' Inquisitr, 7 December 2016. Accessed 17 November 2017. https://www.inquisitr.com/3773311/pizzagate-paintings-modern-art-or-disturbing-clues/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+google%2FyDYq+%28The+Inquisitr+-+News%29
- ¹¹ For further explanations of current psychoanalytic theories of psychosis, see Redmond, Jonathan D. 'Contemporary Perspectives on Lacanian Theories of Psychosis.' *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): 350. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00350>. 18 November 2017.
- ¹² For an example of how a 'magician-illusionist' profits off fake news, see the NPR story: Sydell, Laura. 'We Tracked Down A Fake-News Creator In The Suburbs. Here's What We Learned.' NPR. 23 November 2016. Accessed 18 November 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/11/23/503146770/npr-finds-the-head-of-a-covert-fake-news-operation-in-the-suburbs>.

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