

TALES OF HORROR
& ALIENATION

gaslight

[by HOUDINI magazine]



Anya Juárez Tenorio

[issue one]

TALES OF HORROR & ALIENATION

PRESENTED BY
HOUDINI MAGAZINE

OIL

SAFARI ZONE

I LOVE BEING EVIL

THE SPHINX

CAPITAL AS A DARK GOD

LADY DRACULA

BLACK MAMMOTH

THEDA BARA

ON A WALK

PICO-8 HORROR





THINK OF ANTI-STYLE AS A
SPRAY CAN FOR YOUR
WORDS—QUICK, BOLD, AND
UNAPOLOGETICALLY
YOURS. GRAB A CAN AND
START TAGGING YOUR
CORNER OF THE WEB.

ANTI-STYLE

ANTI-STYLE

ANTI-STYLE

ANTI-STYLE

BLOGGING
// MAGAZINE
FRAMEWORK

[gaslight] //

OIL! by *CJFC*

Our meeting had been arranged by the higher ups. It was to be my first assignment in my new position. Fresh at the company, I was eager to please and carve out a place for myself. This is why I asked no questions when I was told that I would be using an alias and cover story when meeting Mr. Black.

Had I known how this interview would change me, I would have asked more questions.

I arrived at the hospital on the designated day, at the designated time, per the dossier. As expected, I encountered no problems with hospital staff. The credentials provided were not questioned. Security's focus was not on keeping people out. Mr. Black's accommodations were of the quality you would expect from someone with his wealth and status.

I can attest that Mr. Black was no longer sedated, confirming that the nurse was successful in covertly swapping out his medication.

Our conversation was secretly recorded, per instructions, and will be included with this report. I have transcribed moments in the conversation per keywords flagged in the dossier, during moments that are inaudible or muffled on the tape, and based on flow. I will be including contextual details as deemed necessary.



Transcript follows:

A: Hello?

E: Hey, Asher how're you feeling?

A: Fine. Do I know you?

E: I'm Ethan Aaronson, a friend of your sister Rebekah, from temple.

A: Rebekah?

E: Yeah, Rebekah. I'm a good friend of hers. From temple.

A: You're a rabbi?

E: No, nothing like that. Just a good friend.

A: You go to temple? You're jewish?


E: Yeah, Aaronson.

A: Tell me, Ethan, Aaron's son, do you believe in Hell?

At this point Mr. Black broke into a fit. I could not tell if it was rage or sorrow. He fluctuated between these two states during most of our meeting. This was expected due to his medication being cut off. Wading through insanity for answers is the job.

I consoled him to the best of my ability. All that was audible during this fit were gulped apologies between sobs. Apologies to his family, to mankind, to the planet itself. To God. To everyone and everything except himself, he apologized.

When he was in a state as close to calm as he could find, I told him the remainder of my cover from the dossier. I do not know if it was the strength of the dossier's data, my performance, or that this was the first time he had been off drugs since the incident, but the interview moved forward without question of my identity or motive.



Note: Mr. Black displayed religious paranoia common with patients with survivors' guilt throughout our meeting. He has displayed a perceived personal cheating of judgment and a dread of incoming, overlooked and overdue punishment. This was understandable given his current state, and what he did to end up here. I stuck to my instructions and pressed him on this keyword.

E: No, as a Jew, we don't believe in Hell.


A: Yes, we do! Yes, we - It's not a Hell of fire and brimstone and punishment. It's quiet and it's dark and it's still and - Every religion has a world below – an afterlife below. The Summerians had Kur. The Greeks had Tartarus. Christianity has Hell.

E: Yes – Christianity. We are not Christians. That is not our afterlife.

A: It's the same! It's ***** the same! It's – don't you get it? It's not some sort of theoretical, spiritual, ***** – religious theory, ok? It's there! It's ***** there! [sound of Mr. Black stomping his foot on the floor followed by coughing] It's there... [repeated]

Several moments passed as Mr. Black regained as little of his composure someone here could. Again, I consoled him. Ingratiated myself with small acts of service, kind words of reassurance. I needed him to trust me. To believe that I am just here to help. Pressing him wasn't the way forward, but I knew I had an opening. He wanted to talk. He was dropping keywords without any prompting.

All it would take was to do as I was trained and to stick to what was in the dossier. I had to trust the process and prove that I could do this job. A lot of resources have already been invested in this case. I would not waste those resources.



I felt like I was close to the answer. I would succeed at my first assignment. I knew it.

I asked him about his job.

E: Well, I guess you'd know a lot about what's under the ground. Your family's been in the Oil industry for how long now?

A: Four generations ... four damned generations. You know, I used to wear that like a badge of honor. Something to be real proud of. Four generations of Jewish men, some of the first in the business. From roughneck to site manager, to geologist, to researcher to shareholder, to hell, we even had us a few senators [both laugh. laughter fades] ... to Hell. To Hell... Do you know the first recorded use of Oil, Ethan?


E: No. But if I had to guess - probably ancient China.

A: Good guess, yeah, they did, but they weren't the first. It was Babylon.

E: Babylon? Like Babylon, Babylon?

A: Yeah, Babylon. From Genesis. Babylon used bitumen to build their walls and fuel their city. Bitumen is just an old-fashioned word for petroleum. They used asphalt to build the tower of Babel, you see? Their priests called it, "the black blood of the earth," and they used the Oil it in their rituals to their gods. Their ziggurats - their towers? Those weren't just temples, they housed oil drills. Babylon's sin wasn't language, it was disturbing something sacred.

It was my feeling at the time that this confirmed Mr. Black was in likelihood the source of the incident at the lab. His religious delusions overlay a deep hatred of our industry and way of life, and match in tone the scrawled text left at the lab.



I was so close now, I knew I could get a confession. I just needed to find the right pressure points.

E: You think Oil is a sin? Oil is sacred?

A: I – I don't ... look, I'd always heard things, ok? You know, stories. Spooky **** from guys out on the long haul. Everyone's got one or heard one. I grew up with them. Stories about digs gone wrong not cause of something natural, not something the crew did, but...

[Mr. Black began crying again. I approached to console him]


A: No- No, it's my own damn fault for not listening. I'm ok. Sit down. You know, my father used to tell me this story about the "voices in the pipes," and how when you're falling asleep on the rig, you have to learn to ignore them, tune them out. He called it "putting the ghosts to bed." Funny how there's all these little pieces out there, but you don't notice them until later. All these stories. All these studies and data points. For nothing. No one listened. No one ever listened.

E: I'm listening. I'm listening, Asher. What happened?

A: They knew. They always knew. But we didn't listen, right? A whole god damned human race and not one of us listened. I know at least since Rockefeller, we knew. We have his original diaries at the company, you know. And he knew. That *****. That ***** . He knew! He wrote again and again hoe he was plagued by these recurring dreams of "the anguish of unnumbered burning souls." You know he only founded Standard to monopolize the thing he was terrified of? He thought if he could control it, maybe the dreams would stop. I can tell you, they don't. They don't ever stop.

E: You had dreams like that too?

A: You know he called it, Oil, he called it "God's Curse," did you know that? God's Curse. And it wasn't just him who knew. The Nazis knew too. I've seen the files. We've got those at the company too. I have no idea how they smuggled them out but we've had them since the end of



the war. They went after Romanian reserves, right? Operation Fuel Soul they called it, but in German of course. Thought they could communicate with their “Aryan Ancestors,” but when the test engines combusted spontaneously, and the soldiers melted into... well, I would have more sympathy if they weren’t Nazis.

E: That’s understandable. I mean, not having sympathy for Nazis. I’m not really understanding what you’re getting at, Asher. Sorry. Fuel Soul? Nazi experiments in communicating with Oil? What is this?

A: You know, the older you go back in religious texts, the quieter the afterlife becomes? Just dark. Still. Quiet. It wasn’t until recently we started seeing Hell as being on fire. Why is that? Ethan, why is that?

E: I don’t- I don’t know.

A: You ever hear of the concept of the “Akashic Record,” Ethan?


E: No, I haven’t.

A: It’s a record. The record. The record of everything that ever happened to anyone or anything. Preserved. Everything that every lived on this planet’s every experience, recorded. The story of life. Of All Life. Compressed into a single thing. A single record.

As much as I wanted to keep him talking, I had to find a way to shift the conversation back to his work. Specifically, what happened at the lab. I was not paid to listen to the delusional rantings of a madman. I was here to confirm his culpability. And every second wasted was money burned. I tried the direct approach.

E: What does this record have to do with your job? Rebekah said you’re doing research into large-scale disaster prevention.

A: Yeah, I was. Well blowouts, tanker spills, pipeline ruptures. I was tasked with looking for patterns in disasters. Common elements. Those small pieces that add up. I was the authority on



spills in the western hemisphere. I personally handled the investigations on Deepwater, and my first big job was Ixotc. That was the same year as the Valdeez, Bad year. But my office didn't take ownership of that until later. You know on Deepwater, they had logged and recorded "ghost signals" in the well's pressure readings? It was later documented as a sensor error. That was after eleven people died.

E: I didn't -

A: And at Ixotc, a week before the blowout, two workers individually reported seeing humanoid shapes in the plume. I heard talk that workers were so scared PEMEX hired a catholic priest to perform an exorcism at the wellhead, just to get them to come back to work. And everyone I've known to work the Middle East has stories about locals trying to spook them, "don't drill too deep or you'll wake the jinn in the Oil." All written off as superstition or attempts to dissuade us outsiders from drilling their Oil. Of course, we never listened. Why would we have listened?

E: I'm listening, Asher. I'm listening.

A: It's too late. It has always been too late.

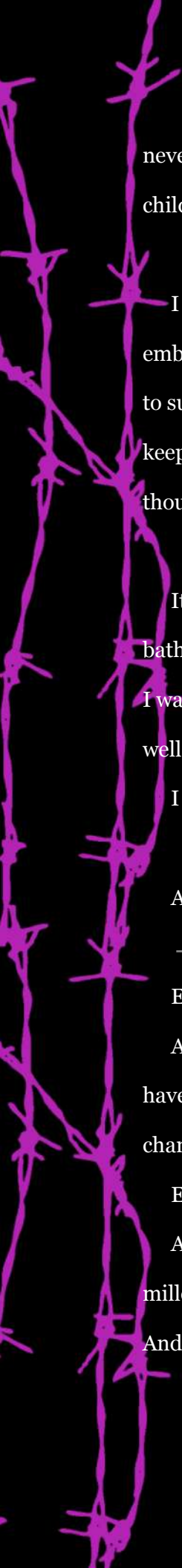
E: It's not too late, Asher. We're developing new, cleaner, technologies every day. I don't think we've lost the war to climate change just yet.

A: Climate change?

E: Yeah... I know you feel guilty, but there's no way you personally could've known what effects fossil fuels would have on the environment way back then. It just felt to me like you were having a crisis of conscience because you work for the Oil industry, and they're, you know, burning the planet. Turning it into Hell, as you said.

A: Climate change? You think this is about climate change?

Mr. Black inhaled deeply and stared me dead in the eyes. I was afraid for a moment he would somehow peer through my disguise and discover the truth behind my eyes, but this moment



never came. I felt ashamed. I do not know why, but I felt a deep shame I have not felt since childhood.

I never learned to swim. I still don't know how. As a child this was a source of embarrassment. I never knew when the moment my lacking would become public. I feared going to summer parties or being invited to anyone's house that had a pool. So, I just avoided them to keep up my image as someone who could swim. I thought I could keep up this image forever. I thought I could fool everyone.

It happened one day at a summer camp. I don't know how I ended up at a pool, or whose bathing suit I had on, but I must have been taken here and given the suit by someone in charge. I was so good at acting like I knew how to swim I had even fooled the adults put in charge of my well-being. I was so good at acting I had even fooled myself.

I closed my eyes and held my breath.


All I remember after I dove in was being swallowed by a cold, still blackness.

E: This isn't about climate change?

A: We've known about that one too, yeah, yeah. Who knows how many cursed studies we have at the company. We are only allowed to see what we're allowed to see. Clearances. Climate change... that's survivable. Forgivable almost. What I've come to learn is a whole of a lot worse.

E: What can be worse than an uninhabitable planet?

A: You know what Oil is right? Dead organic material processed and compressed over millennia. Dead life. But how dead? You see, that's what we keep learning, and then forgetting. And then Learning. And then forgetting. In a damned spiral leading us down, down down, to



you know where. You asked what's worse than an uninhabitable planet? What about an uninhabitable afterlife?

E: Hell.

A: That's right, Mr. Aaronson. Ding! Ding! Ding! The afterlife. Below our feet. Like they always told us it was. And we are drilling it up and burning it. They aren't fossils. They aren't fuel. They're the dead. And we're burning them alive.

E: You're saying Oil is...


A: Yes. Oil is the Akashic Record. Every dinosaur's roar, every neanderthal's breath. Every thought, every feeling, every whispered prayer from millennia ago, recorded in crude. Still there. Dormant. This is life's fate. To all become one in the Oil. That was God's Will. And we... And we...

As he burst into another fit, I began to understand Mr. Black. It was as if he had seen through my cover, and was now inside, worming his way around the corners of my mind. I had a job to do here. I had to stay focused on his confession. None of this other stuff matters. Don't let it in.

I can decompress about all this Oil guilt and religious paranoia when I'm done. A hot shower, a cold beer, and some bad TV back at the hotel. That's all I need to shake this off.

E: Ok. So, let's say you're right. Oil is the afterlife. How can you prove this? What does this mean?

A: [through sobs] Yes... Yes... At my office, Project PHOENIX. There are tapes. Awful, awful recordings. The doctors... scientists, they discovered a way of using harmonic frequencies to play back the record. They were right. They were right... but the things that came out of the Oil weren't animals. They weren't intact. They were twisted. Too many eyes. Teeth coming out of wrong places. Plants that screamed. Bacterial swarms that moved like they were haunted. And



none of them able to escape the Oil. Just dripping, black, nightmares of things half remembered. But we kept going. We were determined we could just push through, that these early failures were just the speed bumps on the road to success. But what that creature did to those doctors... You know there's people screaming in here every night, all night. But that thing - That creature. That's what keeps me awake.

E: What creature?

A: The goal of the project. We were to find an early ancestor to Man.

E: Well, did you?

A: The project was a failure before it even started. The record is broken. It's incomplete. We've drilled too much. We've been burning the afterlife to fuel our lives here. Anything we bring back has been feeling nothing but the fires we started. And they hate us for it. A hatred deeper than any hatred felt by the living. An eternal hatred.

E: What happened to project PHOENIX?

A: Staff? Dead. Lab? Destroyed. The creature? Escaped.

E: And the data? From your research.

A: The data? What? It was destroyed in the lab along with everything else.

E: You didn't make backups, or copies anywhere? Maybe at home or on a laptop?

A: No, no. What? What are you doing?

E: You're sure? Think hard.

A: Oh god, please. No!

E: Answer the question.

A: No! No! I didn't make any -

This was the end of my meeting with Mr. Black. There was no problem with exiting the facility after executing final instructions.

I believe he was telling the truth when he said he did not make any copies of his research. He had no reason to lie at this point and maintained his story until the end.

I cannot attest to his claims of the supernatural.

It wasn't until I was back at the hotel, thinking about how many ancient trees it took to heat my shower, how many years it took to compress what powered the fridge that cooled my beer, ran the TV, that I thought I might have glimpsed the true scale of it all.

*Write for HOUDINI Magazine
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In a world consumed by grotesque body-modification, you are the last purifier, descending into the Chrysalis to destroy its heart and the prophet you once called Father.

TARNOS QUEST



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HOUDINI's Ghost Type

Elite 4 Team

Format: Orre Colosseum

Generation: Three

Sableye @ Charcoal

Ability: Keen Eye

EVs: 252 HP / 4 Def / 252 SpA

Quiet Nature

- Fake Out

- Protect

- Shadow Ball

- Fire Punch

Misdreavus @ Salac Berry

Ability: Levitate

EVs: 252 SpA / 4 SpD / 252 Spe

Timid Nature

- Psychic

- Thunder Wave

- Thunder

- Confuse Ray

Glalie @ Black Glasses

Ability: Inner Focus

EVs: 4 HP / 252 SpA / 252 Spe

Hasty Nature

- Spikes

- Crunch

- Explosion

- Blizzard

Stantler @ Spell Tag

Ability: Intimidate

EVs: 252 Atk / 4 SpD / 252 Spe

Jolly Nature

- Iron Tail

- Hypnosis

- Earthquake

- Shadow Ball

Banette @ Bright Powder

Ability: Insomnia

Shiny: Yes

EVs: 48 HP / 136 Atk / 72 SpD /

252 Spe

Naughty Nature

- Double-Edge

- Will-O-Wisp

- Screech

- Shadow Ball

Gengar @ Scope Lens

Ability: Levitate

EVs: 4 Atk / 252 SpA / 252 Spe

Hasty Nature

- Lick

- Psychic

- Giga Drain

- Ice Punch



ORRE COLOSSEUM

Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.

—Franz Fanon



THE SPHINX BY EDGAR ALLEN POE

During the dread reign of the Cholera in New York, I had accepted the invitation of a relative to spend a fortnight with him in the retirement of his cottage on the banks of the Hudson. We had here around us all the ordinary means of summer amusement; and what with rambling in the woods, sketching, boating, fishing, bathing, music and books, we should have passed the time pleasantly enough, but for the fearful intelligence which reached us every morning from the populous city. Not a day elapsed which did not bring us news of the decease of some acquaintance.

Then, as the fatality increased, we learned to expect daily the loss of some friend. At length we trembled at the approach of every messenger. The very air from the South seemed to us redolent with death. That palsying thought, indeed, took entire possession of my soul. I could neither speak, think, nor dream of any thing else.

My host was of a less excitable temperament, and, although greatly depressed in spirits, exerted himself to sustain my own. His richly philosophical intellect was not at any time affected by unrealities. To the substances of terror he was sufficiently alive, but of its shadows he had no apprehension.

His endeavors to arouse me from the condition of abnormal gloom into which I had fallen, were frustrated in great measure, by certain volumes which I had found in his library. These were of a character to force into germination whatever seeds of hereditary superstition lay latent in my bosom. I had been reading these books without his knowledge, and thus he was often at a loss to account for the forcible impressions which had been made upon my fancy.

A favorite topic with me was the popular belief in omens -- a belief which, at this one epoch of my life, I was almost seriously disposed to defend. On this subject we had long and animated discussions -- he maintaining the utter groundlessness of faith in such matters. -- I, contending that a popular sentiment arising with absolute spontaneity -- that is to say without apparent traces of suggestion -- had in itself the unmistakable elements of truth, and was entitled to as much respect as that intuition which is the idiosyncrasy of the individual man of genius.

The fact is, that soon after my arrival at the cottage, there had occurred to myself an incident so entirely inexplicable, and which had in it so much of the pretentious character, that I might well have been excused for regarding it as an omen. It appalled, and at the same time so confounded and bewildered me, that many days elapsed before I could make up my mind to communicate the circumstances to my friend.

Near the close of an exceedingly warm day, I was sitting, book in hand, at an open window, commanding, through a long vista of the river banks, a view of a distant hill, the face of which nearest my position, had been denuded, by what is termed a land-slide, of the principal portion of its trees. My thoughts had been long wandering from the volume before me to the gloom and desolation of the neighboring city.

Uplifting my eyes from the page, they fell upon the naked face of the hill, and upon an object -- upon some living monster of hideous conformation, which very rapidly made its way from the summit to the bottom, disappearing finally in the dense forest below.

As this creature first came in sight, I doubted my own sanity -- or at least the evidence of my own eyes; and many minutes passed before I succeeded in convincing myself that I was neither mad nor in a dream. Yet when I describe the monster, (which I distinctly saw, and calmly surveyed through the whole period of its progress,) my readers, I fear, will feel more difficulty in being convinced of these points than even I did, myself.

Estimating the size of the creature by comparison with the diameter of the large trees near which it passed -- the few giants of the forest which had escaped the fury of the land-slide -- I concluded it to be far larger than any ship of the line in existence. I say ship of the line, because the shape of the monster suggested the idea -- the hull of one of our seventy-fours might convey a very tolerable conception of the general outline.

The mouth of the animal was situated at the extremity of a proboscis some sixty or seventy feet in length, and about as thick as the body of an ordinary elephant. Near the root of this trunk was an immense quantity of black shaggy hair -- more than could have been supplied by the coats of a score of buffalos; and projecting from this hair, downwardly and laterally, sprang two gleaming tusks not unlike those of the wild boar, but of infinitely greater dimension.

Extending forward, parallel with the proboscis, and on each side of it was a gigantic staff, thirty or forty feet in length, formed seemingly of pure crystal, and in shape a perfect prism: -- it reflected in the most gorgeous manner the rays of the declining sun. The trunk was fashioned like a wedge with the apex to the earth. From it there were outspread two pairs of wings -- each wing nearly one hundred yards in length -- one pair being placed above the other, and all thickly covered with metal scales; each scale apparently some ten or twelve feet in diameter.

I observed that the upper and lower tiers of wings were connected by a strong chain. But the chief peculiarity of this horrible thing, was the representation of a Death's Head, which covered nearly the whole surface of its breast, and which was as accurately traced in glaring white, upon the dark ground of the body, as if it had been there

carefully designed by an artist. While I regarded this terrific animal, and more especially the appearance on its breast, with a feeling of horror and awe -- with a sentiment of forthcoming evil, which I found it impossible to quell by any effort of the reason, I perceived the huge jaws at the extremity of the proboscis, suddenly expand themselves, and from them there proceeded a sound so loud and so expressive of wo, that it struck upon my nerves like a knell, and as the monster disappeared at the foot of the hill, I fell at once, fainting, to the floor.

Upon recovering, my first impulse of course was to inform my friend of what I had seen and heard -- and I can scarcely explain what feeling of repugnance it was, which, in the end, operated to prevent me. At length, one evening, some three or four days after the occurrence, we were sitting together in the room in which I had seen the apparition -- I occupying the same seat at the same window, and he lounging on a sofa near at hand. The association of the place and time impelled me to give him an account of the phenomenon.

He heard me to the end -- at first laughed heartily -- and then lapsed into an excessively grave demeanor, as if my insanity was a thing beyond suspicion. At this instant I again had a distinct view of the monster -- to which, with a shout of absolute terror, I now directed his attention. He looked eagerly -- but maintained that he saw nothing -- although I designated minutely the course of the creature, as it made its way down the naked face of the hill.

I was now immeasurably alarmed, for I considered the vision either as an omen of my death, or, worse, as the fore-runner of an attack of mania. I threw myself passionately back in my chair, and for some moments buried my face in my hands. When I uncovered my eyes, the apparition was no longer apparent.

My host, however, had in some degree resumed the calmness of his demeanor, and questioned me very vigorously in respect to the conformation of the visionary creature.

When I had fully satisfied him on this head, he sighed deeply, as if relieved of some intolerable burden, and went on to talk, with what I thought a cruel calmness of various points of speculative philosophy, which had heretofore formed subject of discussion between us. I remember his insisting very especially (among other things) upon the idea that a principle source of error in all human investigations, lay in the liability of the understanding to under-rate or to over-value the

importance of an object, through mere mis-admeasurement of its propinquity.

"To estimate properly, for example," he said, "the influence to be exercised on mankind at large by the thorough diffusion of Democracy, the distance of the epoch at which such diffusion may possibly be accomplished, should not fail to form an item in the estimate. Yet can you tell me one writer on the subject of government, who has ever thought this particular branch of the subject worthy of discussion at all?"

He here paused for a moment, stepped to a book-case, and brought forth one of the ordinary synopses of Natural History. Requesting me then to exchange seats with him, that he might the better distinguish the fine print of the volume, he took my arm chair at the window, and, opening the book, resumed his discourse very much in the same tone as before.

"But for your exceeding minuteness," he said, "in describing the monster, I might never have had it in my power to demonstrate to you what it was. In the first place, let me read to you a school boy account of the genus Sphinx, of the family Crepuscularia, of the order Lepidoptera, of the class of Insecta -- or insects. The account runs thus:

"Four membranous wings covered with little colored scales of a metallic appearance; mouth forming a rolled proboscis, produced by an elongation of the jaws, upon the sides of which are found the rudiments of mandibles and downy palpi; the inferior wings retained to the superior by a stiff hair; antenn in the form of an elongated club, prismatic; abdomen pointed. The Death's-headed Sphinx has occasioned much terror among the vulgar, at times, by the melancholy kind of cry which it utters, and the insignia of death which it wears upon its corslet."

He here closed the book and leaned forward in the chair, placing himself accurately in the position which I had occupied at the moment of beholding "the monster."

"Ah, here it is!" he presently exclaimed -- "it is reascending the face of the hill, and a very remarkable looking creature, I admit it to be. Still, it is by no means so large or so distant as you imagined it; for the fact is that, as it wriggles its way up this hair, which some spider has wrought along the window-sash, I find it to be about the sixteenth of an inch in its extreme length, and also about the sixteenth of an inch distant from the pupil of my eye!"

**YOU'VE BEEN INVITED
TO THE VELVET ROOM**





I LOVE BE

I love how it feels to be powerful and petty. I love being mean and vile. When someone tells me they hate me, my tar-black heart squirms a little in joy. I love working for cruel masters, who openly plot the demise of all goodness in the world. Best of all, I love getting paid for what I do. If there's a way to extract cash out of someone Consensually or Non-Consensually, I'm the first to try it. I steal, I lie, I kill, I threaten and mock and torture and rule. I love doing all of these things.....In RPGs.

Fictional evil can be a lot more fun than people give it credit for. Unfortunately, we live in Media Illiterate times. Evilness in fiction is chased far more than evilness in the real world. Why is that? Does it anger you to know I'm usually buddies with the worst of the worst types of fictional dudes? In New Vegas, I've done the Legion ending a couple times. I've gone full Corpo in Cyberpunk. I have a kill count of Knights and Hobbits which puts Sauron to shame. On the flip side, I am no fan of the real villains in our world. The Tech 'Kings' who rule an ever-collapsing throne, or the Disciples of the Orange Man, not even the soldiers bombing hospitals and the hordes of folks claiming all three are heroes. If I support the analogues to these men in my fantasies, then why doesn't that support apply to the real thing?

The difference between me and them is that I employ an ancient lost art known as 'Empathy'.

I practice empathy in a very real, very specific way. Not empathy in being nice to dogs or tipping when you go out to eat (I only pet dogs I trust, and only tip when I like the meal, if that helps), but empathy in the sense of learning how enemy rhetoric works. Roleplay is a system all about empathy, if even incidentally. All the decisions you make are built on your emotions rather than logic, and the best kind of roleplay is done when you act as someone very different to yourself.

I can't prove to you in any meaningful way that I am a good person (and if I tried, would you believe it?) but I CAN say with confidence that I'm a pro at these lie-generator games. I've played digital, tabletop, new and old, I've been both player and storyteller many, many times. I have been hundreds of people and my conclusion to those collected years of dream-lives is simple : There is nothing to be learnt in confirmation.

If you want to evolve, you've gotta find out your weaknesses. You have to see your own beliefs from outside.

The lie of being a bad person is a useful, inventive one. It tells you a lot about that hidden version of yourself, the person desperate to bleed, or make others bleed. What kind of person are you when everyone is Screaming, at you, constantly?

Impulse is the point here. The measure of a mind that I'm testing. Someone insults you, how do you act? Someone betrays you, how do you respond? It's easy to be evil if you let go of your morals.

Ramblings by :
MAD_ABOUT_MUSHROOMS

ING EVIL

Villains in fiction are ways we depict arguments we disagree with. If we (the writer) DID agree with them, then why pit them against a Hero who defeats them? The mirror to this is a Villain Protagonist, the domain of 'American Psycho' and 'Breaking Bad'. These characters are believable and enlightening, written for the purposes of exposing truths about the human (and sometimes inhuman) ability to do Evil.

But doing this character yourself, of CHOOSING to be these types of people, is unique. Suddenly this myth stops being about how evil Patrick Bateman is because of his psychopathy, now it's you.

It's horrifying to watch him chase people with a chainsaw, but living it, I see the appeal.

My favourite scene in American Psycho (Skip this paragraph if spoilers concern you) is when he doesn't kill his secretary. It's complex and confusing because it's a glimpse of humanity that sticks out in a way that twists the narrative. I don't know why he didn't do it. What makes a monster hesitate? When your mind is so full of the thrill of killing, why did she spoil the fun? I've been in similar situations, finding pity and other reactions in places I didn't expect. I won't tell you why he chose not to do it, you have to find that truth out yourself.

Compare that to 'Popcorn' RPGs where evil actions are usually met with a slap on the wrist, if you're even allowed to choose. Even when joining evil factions, when seeking to do the worst, the game stops you. Essential NPCs, refusal to have the player really choose the 'wrong' choices, or my least favourite, writing overtly evil forces into 'Misunderstood good guys'. I despise Fallout 4 in ways you couldn't understand.

My argument for all these examples is, when it comes down to it, the freedom to choose is important when being someone you're not. Is it really a kind choice if I'm not allowed to pick any others?

Second to that, it's important these games understand what evil truly is. In a weird, roundabout way, I like being called out for what I do by NPCs. Pushback is important. The power fantasy has to be fought for.

The joke, the punchline, of this article is that I enjoy being evil in video games because, for the most part, RPGs utterly fail in proving they're worth my empathy. Fiction is ABOUT empathy and when the game abandons it for convenience, for flashy lights and satisfying numbers, when it treats villains as monsters to be slain, acting like goodness is an obvious path and all the grimness of the human soul as an inhuman entity, I find the tired act of heroism to be hollow.

Being evil is a way to wring out some of the empathy by force, to push my tired eyes to see parts of my soul I wouldn't otherwise. Nothing can be learned in your comfort zone. You're stronger when the fiction you engage with makes you uncomfortable.

I have been cruel and petty and conniving, but not in Disco Elysium. I got halfway through a Fascism-ideology playthrough before I stopped. It was some of the greatest roleplay writing of its time and I had to quit because that writing was being used to hurt me. It worked. I put the sword down, took the Dark Lord's helmet off, and wept.

This isn't a games review, it's a proof that the artfulness and tactness of roleplay has been lost and dying for so long, but there's a game out there which made me feel again. These games could be so much more.

I like pretending to be more evil than I actually am because it teaches me about myself. There are parts of yourself, your true self, in the masks you choose to wear. These masks will never be tantamount to the real thing, of BEING these people, but I learn about the human condition. I can feel the shame and thrill in killing without ruining people's lives.

Are these roleplaying experiences better at developing empathy than REAL cultural experiences, like learning about tragedies and talking to the people who went through them? FUCK NO. Still, it's an attempt. I reach for the lofty heights of understanding and expression by stress-testing the bounds you give me..

I pretend to be evil because I don't need to prove I'm good inside. It feels like everyone else these days is doing the opposite.



ARTIST: MELIKA MAHDAVI



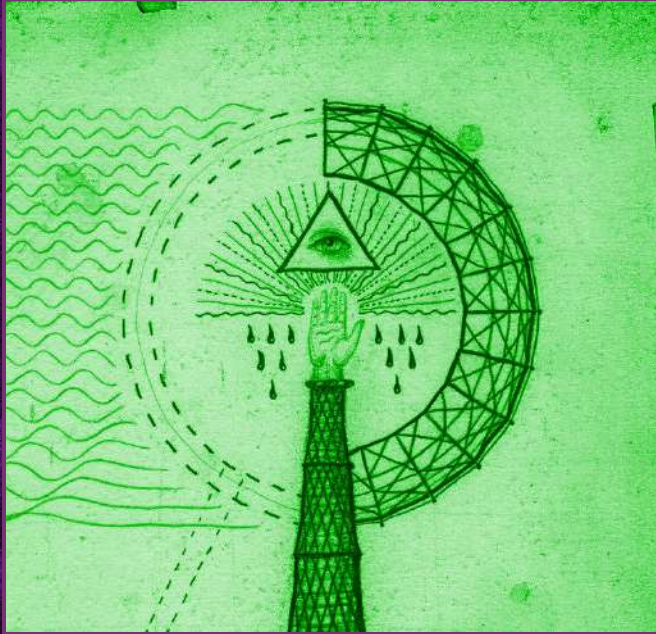
WARRIOR PRINCESS A REAL ONE

IAN WRIGHT™

Marx on Capital as a Real God

Ian Wright (2020)

ianwrightsite.wordpress.com



Harmonic Tower by Daniel Martin Diaz

Introduction

There is a specific aspect of Marx's theory of capitalism that I believe isn't sufficiently emphasised. And that is Marx's view that capital is an actual entity — a being with a mind of its own that operates independently from us.

And of course, when stated plainly like this, the proposition seems absurd. How can a large sum of money that is used to make profit have a mind of its own? That doesn't make any sense at all.

But my aim, here, is to explain precisely why this proposition is not absurd, but in fact articulates the

essential nature of capital, and that viewing capital as an entity is necessary to fully understand the social reality that we find ourselves in.

Marx's alien entity

Marx viewed capitalism as a semi-conscious social formation in the thrall of objective economic laws that no-one really controls. And Marx repeatedly points out that capitalism reproduces the religious mystification we find in earlier stages of history, but in new forms — such as commodity fetishism. So it's quite typical for Marx to employ religious metaphors when discussing capitalism.

But Marx, in comments on James Mill written in 1844, says something more. After making his typical point that the essence of money is a specific kind of social practice — rather than some property of a material thing, such as gold — he then says that our social practice has become an independent, material thing — an actual entity, a “real God” — that has real causal powers. And that we are slaves to this god, and its cult has become an end in itself.

The essence of money is ... the mediating activity or movement, the human, social act by which man's products mutually complement one another, is estranged from man and becomes the attribute of money, a material thing outside man. Since man alienates this mediating activity itself, he is active here only as a man who has lost himself and is dehumanised; the relation itself between things, man's operation with them, becomes the operation of an entity outside man and above man. Owing to this alien mediator — instead of man himself being the mediator for man — man regards

his will, his activity and his relation to other men as a power independent of him and them. His slavery, therefore, reaches its peak. It is clear that this mediator now *becomes a real God*, for the mediator is the real power over what it mediates to me. Its cult becomes an end in itself.

And we should make special note that Marx says a “real” god, and not an imaginary god. So Marx is not talking about the mere ideological worship of the idol of free enterprise or the market, but actual material subordination to an actually existing entity.

Science or metaphor?

This is not merely commodity fetishism, but a full blown Lovecraftian nightmare.



The Great One Monks
Cthulhu, by Giovanni Francisco Luengo

Surely this is hyperbole? Marx’s talk of commodity production manifesting, or invoking, an “entity” that is a

“real god” with “real powers” must be a poetic metaphor, which aims for dramatic impact rather than scientific precision?

We are strongly predisposed to interpret Marx metaphorically, rather than literally, because our modern, commercial culture is thoroughly secular, and we live it every day. Economics, as we all believe, is fundamentally a profane, not a sacred, endeavour. Commercial activity aims for worldly success, not spiritual enlightenment. And success depends ultimately on some mastery of the social and material world, which requires industry, experimentation, and reason — and not worship of, subordination to, and faith in higher beings. Capitalism embraces scientific rationality and technological progress, and has happily detached itself from earlier beliefs about all-powerful gods.

Plus, many of us, I hope, are hard-nosed scientists. And so we should be immediately sceptical of claims about mysterious entities that exist “outside man and above man” So this is the question I want to address is the following: is Marx’s “real God” really real? Is it an entity that actually exists? Or is it mere metaphor, which serves to illustrate, or dramatise, some properties of social reality? To what extent should we take Marx seriously.

Are we really blindly worshipping an alien god that controls us?

To answer this question I need to revisit some core aspects of Marx’s thought, specifically his theory of economic value, but from a new perspective, that of control theory. And by control theory I mean the scientific and mathematical theory of control systems. This new perspective will help us decide how to interpret Marx’s talk of a “real God”.

The affinity of all things

We all know that parts of reality can represent or measure other parts of reality. A ruler measures length, a thermometer measures temperature, and so on. We created these measuring devices for a definite purpose.

But the meaning of money, what it might signify or represent, is less clear. Although money first appeared over 2000 years ago, what it may represent as a symbol remains a subject of deep controversy.

To be clear, by “money” I don’t mean actual coins or notes but instead the numerical quantities we see stamped on coins or printed on notes, or stored as bits in computers, and so on. To be really precise, I should say “unit of account”. But saying “money” is simpler, as long as we’re clear about what we mean.

Now, Marx tackles the meaning of money in his famously difficult, opening chapters of the first volume of Capital. He notes that the exchange of commodities in the market implies there’s something equal, or equivalent, about them. For example, if I sell 20 yards of linen for 10 pounds, and then spend my 10 pounds on a new coat, then, indirectly, 20 yards of linen have been made equal to 1 coat by the act of exchange.

If market prices were entirely random there would be nothing more to say because this equivalence would be accidental. But although prices fluctuate they are not random. There is a strong signal in the noise. Typically, you can’t sell a pen and then buy a plane. And you can’t work for a day and then spend your day’s wages to buy a mansion. There are exceptions. But the exceptions prove the rule.

So during any period of time there are definite well-established market prices that determine the ratios in

which commodities can exchange, that is are equalised, with each other. And all these exchanges are facilitated by, to use Marx’s phrase, an “alien mediator” that we call money.

The “magic and necromancy” of commodities

A quick dip into any anthropological textbook quickly reveals that humans entertain the most diverse and extraordinary beliefs about how the world works and how we should conduct our everyday lives. What some cultures consider normal, others would consider strange and bizarre.

We rarely take an anthropological viewpoint on our own culture. That’s because it’s hard to do. It requires stepping out of one’s conceptual framework, and looking at the ordinary and accepted as unusual and questionable.

So let’s take a moment to note how fantastical commodity exchange actually is.

Only dedicated occultists would dare claim that everything we see around us, all the things and activities in the world, are — despite all appearances — really the same. That 1 kg of caviar is “the same as” 1000 different people clicking on the same internet advert. Or clowning at a children’s party is actually “the same as” 200 rounds of shotgun ammunition. Or that 1 month of computing time on a high-spec machine in the cloud is “the same as” 1 tonne of potatoes. Only highly trained adepts could begin to see the truth of such counter-intuitive and magical affinities.

But we more than see the truth of it. We openly and regularly achieve it. We manifest these magical affinities on a daily basis. We treat quantities of fish eggs, human

attention, clowning performances, bullets, computing time, potatoes, and a bewildering array of other things, as “the same” — because, in the marketplace, they all may be exchanged for one another, via the “alien mediator” we call money.



Mammon by George Frederick Watts, 1884–85.

Magical traditions rather meekly propose correspondences between planets, minerals and human fate. But the magical operations of our modern commercial world — where every thing, activity and even future event is successfully reduced to comparable quantities of this substance we call “money” — overwhelmingly surpass, in both scale and ambition, the most deranged fantasies of

the medieval grimoires. Market exchange achieves a universal affinity between all things under the sun.

It is for these sorts of reasons that Marx writes of the “mystery of commodities” with its “magic and necromancy”.

The economic mysteries

Market societies achieve a titanic conceptual abstraction: every single thing that we swap between ourselves is stamped with a single quantitative property that we call exchange-value. But, rather mysteriously, no single person, no single consciousness, is responsible for maintaining the abstraction.

Marx wrote, “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx, Capital vol. 1).

So we have two economic mysteries: a ubiquitous social abstraction without any obvious content, and an abstraction without an abstractor.

To decide whether Marx’s “real God” is real or a metaphor, we need to dig deeper into the “alien mediator” that is money, what exchange-value represents, and what, if anything, maintains the abstraction.

The content of value, or abstract labour

So let's begin with the first mystery: what is the abstraction of exchange-value? What do those money quantities actually denote?

Marx argues that exchange-value refers to a special, common property shared by all commodities — that of being the products of labour. So caviar and clicks are the same because, to manifest them as commodities in the marketplace, requires the sacrifice of someone's labour.

I think that Marx's argument — for the proposition that the special common property shared by all commodities is labour — is unsatisfactory. I think Marx's conclusion is correct, but his argument for it isn't. But I don't want to take a detour into this debate. So let's simply accept this at face value for now.

Marx then says that the common property cannot be specific kinds of labour — because fishing for caviar, or writing advertising software, or clowning, or making bullets — are very different activities.

The act of exchange abstracts from the individual peculiarities of different labouring activities, leaving something common to all of them, which Marx calls "human labour in the abstract", or abstract labour. Commodities, according to Marx, have economic value "only because human labour in the abstract has been embodied or materialised in it".

Now, we have to be careful with the term "embodied". Marx doesn't literally mean that abstract labour inheres within the material body of the commodity. Abstract labour is not a physical property of a thing. What he means is that some definite fraction of the total labour time of society must be used-up, or expended, to produce the commodity and bring it to market.

So abstract labour is not concrete labour, not a specific type of labouring activity, but something else, something deeper and more general. As Marx states, abstract labour has "the character of the average labour-power of society". So a good first approximation is to think of abstract labour as denoting the causal powers of the typical or average worker. That isn't quite right, but it will do for now.

So, according to Marx, the titanic abstraction achieved by commodity exchange refers to a specific content, which is a property of the material world that he calls abstract labour.

How do we measure abstract labour?

Marx then immediately asks the obvious question, "How, then, is the magnitude of this value to be measured?" and he answers, in a seemingly straightforward way, that it is measured "by its duration, and labour time in its turn finds its standard in weeks, days, and hours." So we're talking about units of time.

We might suppose, therefore, that we can immediately pull out our stopwatches and start measuring the amount of time people spend working, and then correlate our measurements with the prices we observe in the market. Because if prices really do represent labour-time then we should, in-principle, be able to scientifically verify this claim.

Soul Groups by Kazuya Akimoto



But that would be too hasty. Before we can even consider empirically verifying Marx's theory of value, we need more clarity on what that theory actually is.

Now I'm not sure how deliberate this is, especially as I read Marx in translation. But it might be noteworthy that Marx does not ask, "How should we measure quantities of abstract labour?", and neither does he answer by saying that "we can measure it by its duration".

And that's because we don't measure abstract labour. Something else measures it.

This property of Marx's theory — that money refers to labour time in virtue of our collective, social activity and independently of our thoughts about it — is radically different from the classical political economy of his day, and also modern economic theory.

The abstraction is not ours because our cognition is not performing the abstraction. We are not the abstractor. Instead, the mysterious abstractor is taking the measurements about labour time and connecting the form of value, which is money, to its content, which is abstract labour.

So, as scientists, our first job isn't to start measuring labour time. Our first job is to understand what the abstractor is, and how it connects its abstraction to its world. We need a theory of this abstracting entity, and its powers, before embarking on empirical verification.

Who or what is the abstractor?

So we have a partial answer to the first economic mystery. The abstraction of exchange-value, or more plainly money, represents "abstract labour". So let's turn to the second

mystery: who is doing the abstracting? Who or what is the mysterious abstractor?

In fact, Marx has already told us who it is. Sometimes mysteries hide in plain sight. The big clue is Marx's choice of the title for his magnum opus. The abstractor is what Marx calls "capital".

But the term "capital" can mislead. First of all, it gets us thinking about large sums of money. A capital sum. But capital is much more than that. And, second, modern economic theory has reduced the term "capital" to a vanilla accounting term that mixes-up, in a confused way, capital equipment with large sums of money.

But capital, for Marx, is first and foremost a social practice. Capital denotes a collection of activities that certain people regularly do embedded within a system of property rights, contracts, and coercive power. Capital is a circuit, where an initial capital sum is "invested" in production, and then typically returns with a profit increment. Capital enlarges itself, whenever it can. This circuit is mediated not only by money, but also economic production itself, including the disciplining and exploitation of workers.

Marx's standard language — of capital, of social relations of production, circuits of accumulation, and so on — doesn't fully evoke what's really going on, and I think that's why he often turned to religious language.

So instead of saying "capital" I'm also going to say "the controller". Because capital is a control system, not merely in the political sense, but in the more profound and scientifically important sense of being a negative feedback control system. Capital is literally a controller. So if capital is a controller, then how does it work, and what does it control?

Control systems

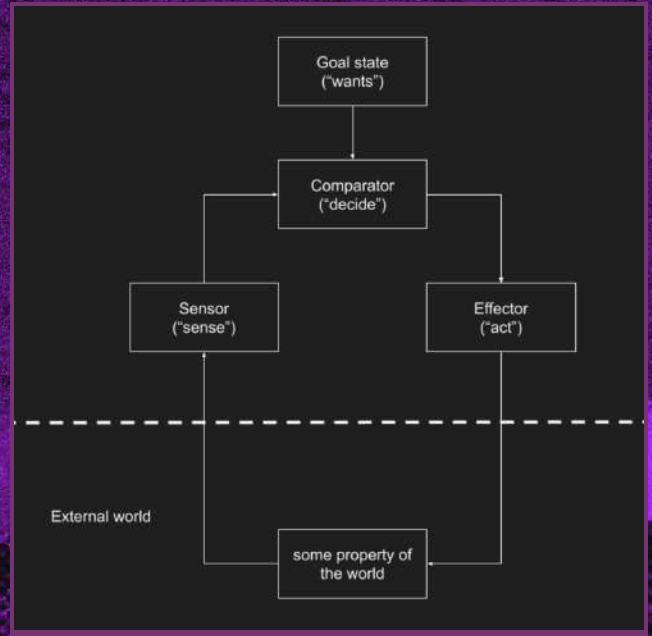
Scientific progress sometimes consists in organising a whole range of diverse phenomena under a single principle. The emergence of cybernetics, in the early 20th Century, was just such an event.

The core idea of cybernetics is that many different kinds of systems — be they mechanical, physical, biological, cognitive, or social — are types of control systems that exhibit a particular kind of causal structure, the negative feedback control loop.

And it turns out that negative feedback control explains how parts of reality can control, and therefore refer to, other parts of reality.

Take the mundane example of a thermostat. You set the system's goal by fiddling with its temperature setting. The thermometer-component of the system measures the room's temperature. The thermostat mechanically compares its setting to the measured temperature. If the temperature is too high, then the thermostat emits a signal to turn the heating on; otherwise it turns the heating off. In this way, the heating system controls the temperature of the room. And it will do this autonomously, without you ever having to touch it again.

All negative feedback control loops have four main components: (i) an internal goal-state, (ii) a sensor that measures some property of the external world, (iii) a comparator that compares the sensor reading to the goal state, and (iv) an effector or action system, which changes the world to move closer to the goal state.



The temperature of our bodies is controlled by a similar kind of biological feedback loop, except the control loop isn't implemented upon metal, wires and plastic, but upon nerves, enzymes, and sweat glands.

In fact, all homeostatic and goal-directed systems in nature conform to this causal template. Different examples just implement the components of the control loop in different ways.

And, perhaps surprisingly, there is a very significant control loop, hiding in plain sight, which affects every aspect of modern life in the most profound and intimate manner.

Capital as a negative feedback control system

The basic unit of production, where capital meets labour to produce goods and services, is the capitalist firm. And every profit-maximising firm is owned by a private capital.

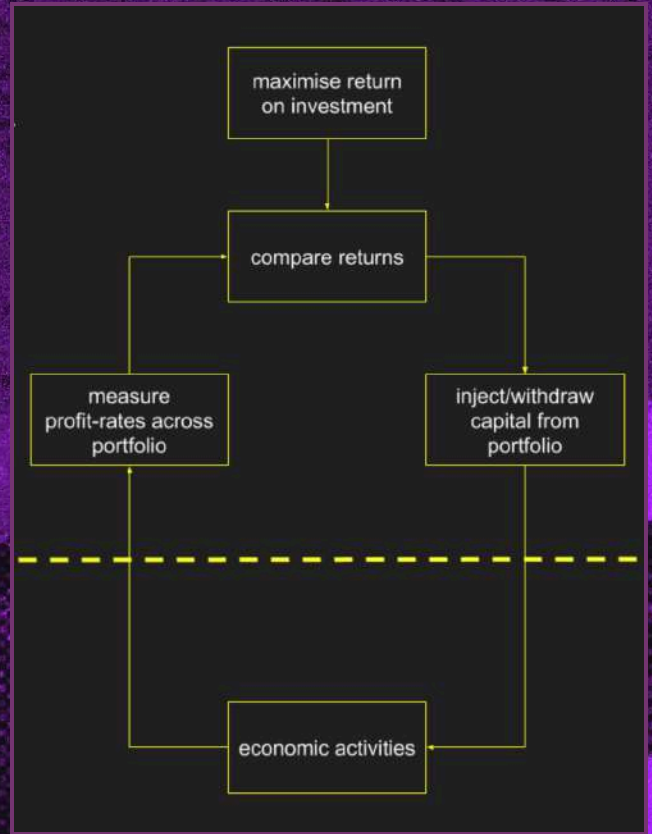
Capitalists extract profits from firms. They can spend only a fraction of their profits on luxury consumption. Because if the rich spent all their profit on luxuries their capital will rapidly diminish and expire, compared to competing capitals who invest their profit in further profitable activities. Profit income must be reinvested in order to make more profit. This is the prime directive for anyone who possesses a capital sum of money.

Owners of capital — that is capitalists — can't put all their eggs in one basket. That's too risky because firms can go under, or assets that store value might depreciate. So capitalists spread their risk by owning a portfolio of investments with different risk profiles.

A typical portfolio will consist of cash held in different sovereign currencies, government, municipal and corporate bonds, shares in different companies, from risky start-ups to blue chips, and all kinds of income-producing assets, such as land and housing. Basically anything that might yield a higher than average return.

Each individual capital must aim to maximise the return over its portfolio. If it fails it will diminish in size relative to other capitals, and eventually cease being a capital at all.

And it's right here that we again find the causal structure of a feedback control system. An individual capital — when we consider it as a social practice mediated by a privately owned large sum of money — also has its own goal state, sensory inputs, decision making, and ability to act upon the world in which it is embedded.



Let's take each of these in turn. (i) The goal of an individual capital is to maximise the average return from every dollar (or pound) invested. (ii) The "sensory inputs" are the different profit-rates earned across the portfolio. (iii) The capitalist, or the financial experts they employ, compare the different profit-rates, and (iv) the feedback loop is closed by actions that withdraw capital from poorly performing investments, and inject capital into high performing investments.

This control loop manifests as an insatiable and ceaseless search for high returns.

Capital doesn't care how its money is actually used in production. It entirely abstracts from all concrete activities. The only thing it can sense, compare and use is abstract value.

So the commanding heights of the global economy consists of an enormous ensemble of individual capitals, each manically scrambling for profit, reacting to the signals of differential returns received from its tendrils that extend to every productive activity under its rule, continually injecting and withdrawing capital to and from different industrial sectors and geographical regions. The entirety of the world's material resources, including the working time of billions of people, are repeatedly marshalled and re-marshalled away from low and towards high-profit activities. In the space of months, entire industrial sectors may be raised up, relocated, or thrown down.

Capitalists are possessed, mere machine components of capital

What about the individual people who participate in this social practice? Surely their individual consciousness, their ideas, and their behaviour matter, and make a difference?

To a certain extent they do of course. But individuals come and go, but capitals live much longer than any individual human. The people controlled by the capital — that is the workers that supply labour to firms, and capitalists that exploit them and extract profits — are mere replaceable components in the control loop, mechanically performing prescribed functional roles.

For example, Marx writes in Capital, that:

“to classical economy, the proletarian is but a machine for the production of surplus-value; on the other hand, the capitalist is in its eyes only a machine for

the conversion of this surplus-value into additional capital.”

We often say that a capitalist possesses capital. But it is more accurate to say that capital possesses them. Capitalists are the human face of an inhuman intelligence with its own logic and its own goals.



Mr. Kraken by Olly Jeavons

“In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality” (Communist Manifesto).

The demonic power of capital

Bigger capitals enjoy the advantage of larger portfolios, which spreads risk. In consequence, capital tends to concentrate in a few hands. So we find a large number of small capitals, and a very small number of astronomically large capitals, which earn profits that dwarf the GDP of many nation states. The scale and power of some capitals is truly titanic.

And these titans are so much in control, that they are out of control. Again, a quote from the Communist Manifesto:

“Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.”



Medusa by Rado Javor

In mythology, demons are anarchic, out-of-control entities that cause us harm, through tormenting us or through

possession. Not only is the power of capital titanic, it is demonic. Let's just briefly consider a few examples.

Every day millions of workers, around the globe, have no choice but to sacrifice their time, and their vitality, to produce new profit for the autonomous controllers. No matter how hard, long or efficiently we work, the imperative to work remains.

Why? Because every labour-saving technical innovation takes the form of profit, which is then captured by individual capitals, and immediately re-injected into the material world to animate new activities for further profit. This is why, despite huge advances in automation, the working day remains as long as ever.

Take another example: the logic of capital demands maximum profit extraction from firms, and that means minimising wages. Those possessed by capital live an exalted existence. But the world's dispossessed must feed, clothe and maintain a home with an average income of about 7 pounds a day.

Another example: it's better to be exploited than not exploited. We are subject to the whims of the business cycle and periodic crises of accumulation. Recessions regularly throw large numbers of people out of work, through no fault of their own. Suddenly bills can't be paid. Families are thrown onto the street, as happened in the US during the 2008 mortgage crisis, and is happening again now.

Why? Because individual capitals are almost blind. They see only differential returns across their portfolios. And returns may be good even if unemployment is high, or human misery spills onto the streets. Capital does not care.

Another example: capital deals in abstract value, and things that are not owned, which aren't bought and sold, therefore have no value to it at all. So the material wealth of nature — the land, the oceans, and the atmosphere — is relentlessly plundered without any regard for the consequences.

Capital destroys us, and the environment. The endless production and profit-making cannot stop, because each individual capital must compete to survive. Marx summarised the prime directive of capital as:

“Accumulate, accumulate! ... reconvert the greatest possible portion of surplus-value ... into capital! Accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake: by this formula classical economy expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie”.

So all the autonomous control loops have the single-minded goal of extracting profit from the world's activities. If an activity fails to satisfy this goal, then the controller withdraws its capital, and the activity stops.

So at the apex of the economy we have a competing collection of identical controllers — with an atavistic, low level of demonic intelligence — which inject and withdraw a social substance that appears to possess the magical power of animation, of bringing things alive, of creation; but also appears to possess the power of annihilation, of suffocation, of bringing things to an end, of destruction.

We are definitely not in control. And something else definitely is in control.

Animism

So what are we really talking about now?

We're saying that a new kind of supra-individual control system emerged, quite spontaneously, from our own social intercourse, and then — in a very real sense — has taken on a life of its own, turned around, and started controlling us.

Capital in a scientific, not a metaphorical sense, is a control system. And it is capital, as a control system, that ultimately creates and maintains the abstraction we call exchange-value. Capital is the abstractor.

But before we can fully explain how that happens we need to take some moments to explore the relationship between control systems and primitive forms of cognition.

So, the earliest humans were at the mercy of nature. At any time, the harvest might be ruined, or illness or injury might strike. The earliest theoretical framework to explain the capricious forces of nature seems to be animism.



Green Man Linocut by Alan Rogerson

Animism is the belief that all natural phenomena — such as the weather, geography, plants, trees, animals and so on — are ultimately controlled by an autonomous, living entity with human-like agency. Early humans believed that different clusters of empirical phenomena were controlled by conscious spirits, with minds of their own.

Marx gives us a very brief sketch of this history of religion in Part 3 of “Anti-Duhring”, which begins with a discussion of animism. The weather gods, sea gods, sun gods, moon gods, gods of illness and healing, and so on, are the hidden actors, or ultimate cause, of uncontrollable events.

Now, if you believe gods are invisible hands that affect your life, then it makes perfect sense to appeal to them — by praying, or giving them gifts, or building temples to worship them. The power and majesty of the ancient gods was the perverted expression of the powerlessness and misery of early humans.

The “real God”: beyond commodity fetishism

Today, we enjoy a great deal more control over our lives compared to our ancestors. And this material progress, in itself, has gradually removed the material basis for animistic belief systems.

Many of the causal powers of the ancient gods and demons, have, one by one, been explained by science. And so they lost their power. Instead of a ragbag of pagan gods, with special powers and domains, we have scientific fields with their own theories and technical terminology.

Of course, animistic religion persists in capitalist society, but typically well outside the mainstream. As Marx explains, in his short sketch:

“At a still further stage of evolution, all the natural and social attributes of the numerous gods are transferred to one almighty god, who is but a reflection of the abstract man.”

So modern mainstream religions, such as Islam and Christianity, talk of one, all-encompassing god, who is remote and abstract, and unlike the animistic deities of old, typically doesn't interfere in everyday phenomena.

Marx then turns to modern society, and makes the important point that capitalism does not abolish the material conditions that give rise to religious beliefs:

“in existing bourgeois society men are dominated by the economic conditions created by themselves ... as if by an alien force. The actual basis of the religious reflective activity therefore continues to exist ... It is still true that man proposes and God (that is, the alien domination of the capitalist mode of production) disposes.”

Precisely because capital is in control, and not people, then the “actual basis” of “religious reflection” continues to exist.

Famously, in the first chapter of Capital, Marx explains how market exchange necessarily generates commodity fetishism — which is the illusion that economic value is a natural or material property of commodities. So inanimate objects — especially forms of money, such as gold — fetishistically appear to have special powers in-and-of themselves.

But Marx's talk of a “God” that we “propose” to and it “disposes” takes us beyond commodity fetishism. Marx is

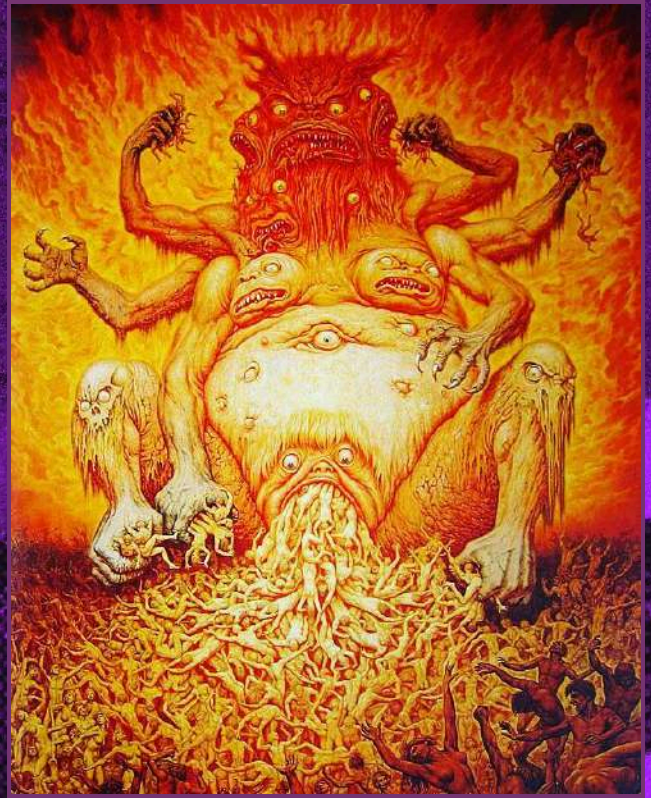
pointing to the fact that economic laws have god-like powers that operate independently of us, and control and dominate us, like forces of nature.

Is Marx therefore committing an animistic fallacy by suggesting that capital, as an independent entity, is a “real God” with “real powers” that as a mind of its own?

Once we understand capital to be an autonomous control system, then the answer is a plain “no”. A negative feedback control loop has all the basic elements of cognition: it in fact senses, decides and acts. A qualified kind of animism is entirely appropriate here.

Of course, the sensing, thinking and acting cycle of an individual capital is quite unlike that of an individual human being. Nonetheless, both pursue distinct goals, and both have the power to make things happen. One control system consists of neurons, muscles and organs; while the other consists of social practices, belief systems and the exchange of a value substance.

So, speaking animistically, a spirit, or deity, indeed controls capitalism. This god can shatter itself, and appear at multiple times in multiple places. And it can combine with versions of itself, to aggregate into bigger and more powerful incarnations. It can possess humans, and control them, by forcing them to work, or forcing them to accumulate. This entity directs social activity by giving and withdrawing its magical substance, which we call value. We sacrifice ourselves to it, we appease it, and we hope it will favour us.



Kali by Johfra Bosschart, 1976

All these statements are scientifically accurate. They are not metaphors. In fact, adopting a more animistic theory of modern capitalism would, counter-intuitively, constitute scientific progress.

Let's now take this animistic point of view and enquire what capital, as a god-like entity, tends to think about. What are the contents of capital's cognition?

What does the real God control?

Sometimes it's obvious what a particular control system controls, because we designed it. For example, we know that a thermostat controls room temperature. In consequence, the electrical control signals that flow within the thermostat refer to temperature.

But the vast majority of control systems are not designed by people. Nature is stuffed full of them, from simple homeostatic mechanisms to incredibly complex animal brains. These systems evolved, without a designer, and therefore we have to work harder to determine what they control, and what their internal representations may, or may not, represent in their environment.

I will skip the details of a scientific theory that determines what controllers in fact control. It's not a simple story (see here). I think the complexity of that story partially explains why Marx's argument that abstract labour is the substance of value, in the opening chapters of Capital — chapters that he famously worked and re-worked, that Engels joked bore the marks of Marx's painful carbuncles — is not entirely satisfactory. Marx had stumbled upon a hard problem that couldn't be fully solved with the conceptual tools of his time.

So, instead of going down this rabbit hole, I'll instead jump to the conclusion and simply state what capital, as a control system, in fact controls.

We already know that capitals, both big and small, are intimately connected to the process of production. The capitalist firm borrows capital to buy inputs and means of production, and hire workers. Workers supply concrete labour to produce use-values for sale in the market.

Now, the controller judges all the different concrete activities occurring across its portfolio in the same way: which activities yield above-average returns, and which do not? The controller rewards firms that make comparatively high profits with new injections of investment; but punishes firms that make comparatively low profits, or losses, by withdrawing its capital. These monetary rewards and punishments flow down, through firms, into the labour market, and reward concrete labour by the

payment of wages, or punish by withdrawal and unemployment.

In this very real sense, capital wants specific kinds of concrete activities, and does not want other kinds. The kinds of activities it wants are those that yield above-average profit. Capital is therefore controlling us. And it controls how we spend our time.

Abstract labour: the kind of labour that capital wants

So capital wants labouring activities that yield profit. Simplifying, we can identify two essential properties that concrete labour must possess in order to yield profit.

First, it must be useful to others, that is produce commodities that can be sold in the market. No-one will buy a coat with three arms.

Second, it must have above-average efficiency; in other words, a firm makes more profit if it uses-up less labour-time than competitors that produce the same commodity.

And this is why, just after Marx first introduces the concept of abstract labour, he immediately points out that only socially necessary, and useful, labour counts as abstract labour.



We don't
need no
education,
Pink Floyd

Capital does not want workers to spend time smelling the roses with their family and friends. That activity doesn't yield saleable use-values. Neither does capital want workers to slack on the job, or become ill. Slacking or illness isn't efficient. Capital, if it completely had its way with us, would have us spend all our time labouring in the firm at the highest possible intensity, continually striving to out-compete other workers in the labour market. This is the kind of behaviour that capital wants.

So capital controls concrete labour, the real labouring activities of the working population in all their diverse manifestations. And capital controls actual labour-time, actual clock times of real people doing real things. It is capital itself that holds a metaphorical stopwatch in its hand, measuring and accounting, and judging and condemning; always on the look-out for the slightest slacking off or insubordination.

And the goal of capital is to convert concrete labour into abstract labour, into the kind of labour that both fits into the division of labour, so it can be exchanged against other labour, and into the kind of labour that fully sacrifices itself to capital, gives itself up as tribute, in order to yield profits for the capitalist firm, and ultimately the controlling, dominant capitals that stand behind them.

In other words, "abstract labour" is manifested, brought into reality, by capital itself. *Maximising profit is identically the process of maximising the manifestation of abstract labour out of concrete labour.*

This is why Marx says that only abstract labour "creates value". Concrete labour may or may not create value. If it doesn't, it isn't abstract labour, and capital as a controller quickly works to eradicate its existence, by withdrawing capital from the firms that employ it.

Capital as egregore

So capital is a controller that employs a form of value — money — to control the content of value — which is our labour time. The form and the content are bound together, linked semantically in a relation of representation to referent, by the lawful regularities instantiated by generalised commodity production.

As we have seen, control systems instantiate the basic elements of cognition. They in fact have internal representations that refer to the world they act in. In consequence, *Marx's theory of value is fundamentally a theory of an alien cognition that controls us.*

No wonder he wrote of the necromancy of commodity production because only the religious, magical and occult traditions in our history have adequate concepts to express our predicament.

The occult concept of an egregore is useful here. An egregore is a non-physical entity that exists in virtue of the collective ritual activities of a group yet operates autonomously, according to its own internal logic, to materially influence and control the group's activities. The group creates the egregore, and the egregore creates the group, in a self-reinforcing feedback loop.

Marx, in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, explicitly calls out this reciprocal relationship between a god and its people, between a cult and its egregore.

"as a result of the movement of private property ... we have obtained the concept of alienated labor ... But ... it becomes clear that though private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labor, it is rather its consequence, just as

the gods are originally not the cause but the effect of man's intellectual confusion. Later this relationship becomes reciprocal."

The ritual activities of the initial capitalist cults were materially so successful they rapidly metastasised and, in a few centuries, engulfed the world. What is universal becomes the unnoticed background. So the egregore, in our society, is hard to see. It hides in plain sight. We refer to it, of course, but obliquely, using soporific names, such as "the economy" or "the markets" or "capital". But Marx pointed to a better name for it, one designed to wake us from our slumber: *A real God with real powers*.

An alien cognition that binds value form to labour content

So capital is an egregore. Not metaphorically, or ironically, but actually. Capital is a being, an autonomous entity, with primitive thoughts about us. Money is how it measures us, and money is how it commands us. Capital is an alien cognition that acts in the world to bind the form of value to its content.

So now we know what the abstractor is. And now that we have a clearer grasp of the core structure of Marx's theory of value it becomes much easier to spot misinterpretations of it.

There are misinterpretations that emphasise the content at the expense of the form. Marx's theory is not at all like the naive materialism we find in classical political economy, or modern Sraffian interpretations of Marx, which posit one-way causation from concrete labour-time to money prices. Instead, we must think about feedback loops, about two-way causation, from content to form, and from form back to content.

But there are other misinterpretations that emphasise the form at the expense of the content.

Clearly, Marx's theory is an objective theory of value. Despite the pretensions of subjective utility theories of value we cannot collectively wish planes to be cheaper than pens. We are not the dominant controller, we are the controlled. The individual consumer is not king.

But more sophisticated variants of idealism also misinterpret Marx's theory. Some Marxists think capital dreams about abstract labour, that abstract labour is an invention of the capitalist system, which doesn't actually refer to something existing independently in objective reality. This reduces Marx's theory to a postmodernism parody of ghostly and ideal forms.

In these misinterpretations the form has no content. And so money doesn't refer to any property that exists independently of it. The form creates an illusory content. In this view, abstract labour may indeed have real effects, in the way that belief in an Father Christmas may cause people to offer cookies and milk, but it doesn't really exist.

This may seem sophisticated but ultimately it reduces to value nihilism, where there are only prices, and there is nothing hidden behind them.

But Marx's theory is essentially about the control of concrete labour time, the actual objective working conditions of millions of people. Any interpretation of Marx that claims abstract labour cannot be measured independently of markets and prices, or cannot provide a definition of the content of value without relying on magic coefficients that depend on prices — has gone awry.

Of course, like any entity, capital's thoughts may not perfectly reflect, or represent, the reality in which it is embedded. However, if a control system successfully

controls then its internal representations will bear a truthful correspondence to reality. And capital is a supremely successful controller.

And, ultimately, this is why Marx's value claims can be empirically verified: labour is already disciplined to be efficient and useful. And so the majority of concrete labour is already abstract labour. In consequence, if we pick a group of 50 workers randomly they will approximate the value-producing power of 50 units of abstract labour. Take larger aggregates and the approximation only improves.

Taking out our stopwatch won't work at the level of an individual worker because there's no guarantee their concrete labour will ultimately count as abstract labour. But our stopwatch will measure abstract labour if we collect sufficient samples. As Marx stated, abstract labour has the character of the average labour-power in society. So the control success of capitalism means we can measure quantities of abstract labour before that labour is equalised and homogenised in the market.

An analogy might help here, because this is quite a subtle but important point.

An ethologist, studying the behaviour of an animal in the wild, can't truly get inside the animal's head and see the world through its eyes. The ethologist can never fully know what it's like to be a bat. But nonetheless ethologists have developed detailed theories of echolocation, and how a bat's cognition represents its environment. In a similar way, we are studying the behaviour of an autonomous entity, called capital, with an alien cognition. Abstract labour is its concept, not ours. But we can form a concept of abstract labour that corresponds to its concept of abstract labour. After all, we, the controlled, and it, the controller, all live in the same world. And we can both talk about, and represent, an objective property of that shared world.

And what is that objective property? We can now refine our initial, approximate definition of abstract labour. It is not just average labour, or the common causal powers of human labour. It is something more specific, something more historically determined and therefore contingent.

Abstract labour is a collection of causal powers possessed by human labour that can manifest as an ability to produce an endless variety of useful things for others, to make profits by working harder or longer, to improve techniques of production so more may be produced with less, and to out-compete others in a ceaseless scramble for profit. If we workers lacked these causal powers then capital would fail to mould us into the value-creating, homogeneous units that it wants.

Capitalism as an occult mode of production

Capital isn't a huge sum of money but a definite set of social practices that instantiate a control system. Each capital is a controller that acts independently of any individual human consciousness. In this very real sense, each capital is an entity, a being-for-itself. And each capital has primitive forms of cognition: capitals continually sense, decide and act in order to achieve the overriding goal of maximising returns. This is not a metaphor, but science. Marx's "real God" is really real.

Marx reminds us that capitalism does not abolish the material conditions that give rise to magical and religious thinking. Commodity fetishism is rife, and confusions abound. For instance, modern economic science has successfully repressed Marx's theory of value, and the theft-based nature of capitalist property relations, yet has proved itself incapable of formulating an alternative theory of economic value. The economic mysteries remain.

To add to the confusion and mystification, capitalist ideology promotes the idea that our commercial culture is fundamentally a rational and secular endeavour. But the opposite is the case. The rationality of capitalism is not human but alien, and we do not control it, but it controls us. Capitalist ideology refuses to see the “real God” that is capital, and our subordination to it. The god is real, but hidden, hiding in plain sight. And in this sense, *capitalism is an occult, not a secular, mode of production.*

The value form, the titanic abstraction that permeates every aspect of our lives is, in a sense, the primitive language of the controller. It sees and judges our activities in terms of abstract value, by comparing differential profit-rates across its portfolio. But it also commands our activities using abstract value, by injecting and withdrawing its substantial being, which is money. Capital works to mould, shape, and discipline the total labour-power of society into the specific form of abstract labour, which is labour that gives itself up, utterly and completely, as tribute to capital.

So the value form participates in both measuring labour time, and also commanding labour time. We shouldn't be surprised that *the value form also has imperative semantics.* Money doesn't merely participating in measuring but it also commands. Generalised commodity exchange has no conscious planner or plan, and therefore the command and control necessary to organise the division of labour is achieved through the allocation of capital, the transmission of money and the structure of prices.

Capital commands concrete labour time to manifest as abstract labour time, and therefore brings into being what is already latent within us. But capital intensifies and perfects only a part of us. We are more than merely creatures able to manifest abstract labour. We have the power to do much more than merely produce useful things

by working intensely for long hours. So, despite capital's rule we resist, and find places and moments where we can be more fully ourselves. But capital does not want us to play, learn, explore, care or give freely. Capital wants us to produce — endlessly. And therefore we, under the rule of capital, are reduced to shadows, mere narrow abstractions, of what we could be.

We are the abstracted, and it is the abstractor.

Slaves to the God Capital

Allow me to finish with a very blunt analogy. Cows can do lots of things. But all we care about is that they produce as much milk and meat as possible. And so we breed them, inject them, rear them, and control them to do only that. Sometimes their udders are so distended by excessive production they tear, split and spill.

We are cattle to capital. We too have become distorted and disfigured by its universal rule. It brands us as abstract labour. But we are also concrete individuals. The form does not exhaust the content. And this seemingly innocuous non-identity between form and content is the fundamental reason why, one day, we will escape from capital's rule.

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LADY DRACULA

LADY DRACULA is the new, upcoming Classicvania from Goth Donut Games.

TRANSFORM into new forms like a wraith, a spider and a bat, in order to fly, climb and blast your way into a new age for the linear Vampire Platformer genre. Jump into a transformation bubble, and float through hazards in Wraith Form, climb along walls and ceilings in Spider Form, or use Bat Form to blast from bubble to bubble across the screen - just be careful not to miss.



WISHLIST NOW



The Black Mammoth

By [doctor drugs]

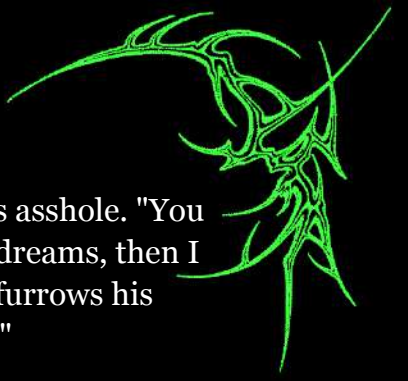
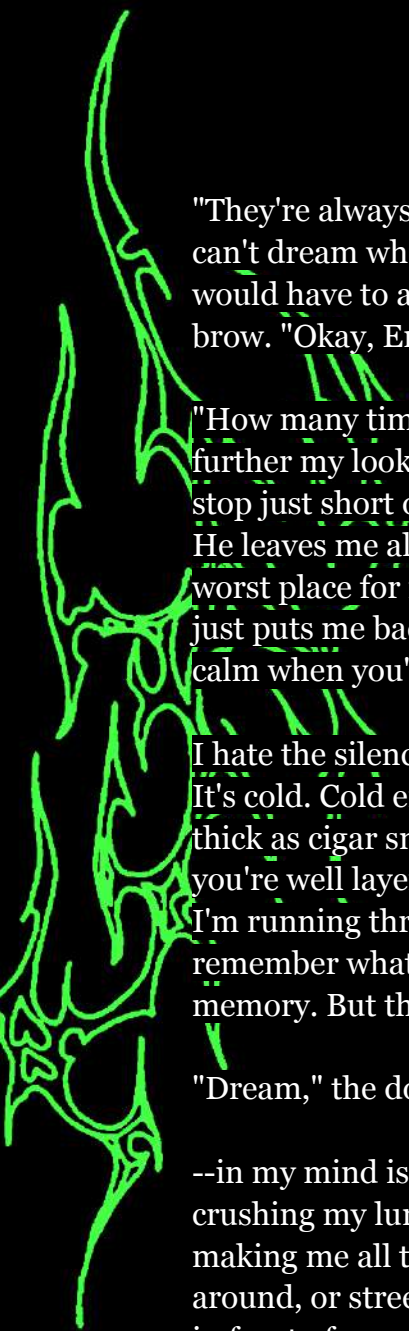


I sit across the room from the doctor. He sits there with his eyes focused on his notepad as he speaks at me from the side of his mouth. "So, how have you been for this week," he says prefacing an annoyed sigh. I tell him that I'm having trouble sleeping with the new meds. I tell him that they turn my stomach, and I can barely eat. I'm looking at the skin on my hands, and they aren't that far from being completely gray. I tell him that I'm not sure I'd want to sleep if I could, and that I fear the coffee is burning the stomach lining I have left and that the smell of cigarettes is ever present here. He clicks his pen a couple of times and sighs again. "I think you know what I'm asking, John. The dreams."

"Memories," I say.

"Not Memories, Enrique, they're dreams."

I plea with him, "I don't sleep, how can I have dreams?" I can feel the vitriol in his breaths. He seems exhausted to try to convince me that my memories aren't real. I'm not really one to dwell on what people think, but being kept here against my will is starting to turn on something angry in me. We're at odds, he and I. He gives me this look, staring at the part of the chair I'm pressed against, but not at me. I feel, at this moment, like I don't exist beyond the number and set of letters on his notepad.



"They're always there," I spit out, not ready to sit there in silence with this asshole. "You can't dream when you're not asleep, but if I were to admit that they were dreams, then I would have to admit that I'm always asleep." He takes a deep breath and furrows his brow. "Okay, Enrique. They're not dreams. So tell me what you see again."

"How many times do I need to repeat it," I say, squeezing my closed fist into my face as I further my look down this stupid fucking couch. I can hear his teeth click together and stop just short of grinding. He jots down scribbles while remaining in this awful silence. He leaves me alone with my thoughts often in these things, and that's honestly, the worst place for me to be. That stupid poster on the wall that says 'stay calm to stay sane,' just puts me back in the arms of terror every time. How do they expect anyone to stay calm when you've seen what I've seen?


I hate the silence more than I hate him condescending to me, so I start. It's cold. Cold enough for the slightest bit of breath that escapes your nose evaporates as thick as cigar smoke. Cold enough for you to feel pain throughout your fingertips even if you're well layered. Cold enough for you to think that everything might be frostbitten. I'm running through soft powder snow, and that's difficult as it is, but I can barely remember what I'm running from, and I can only seem to scratch the surface of that memory. But the memory—

"Dream," the doctor insists.

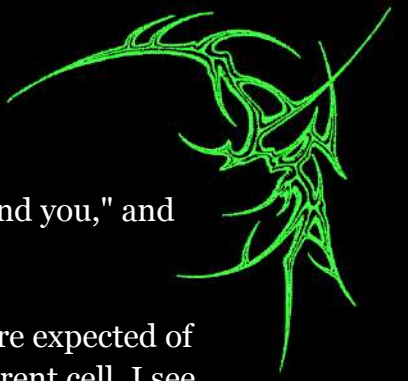
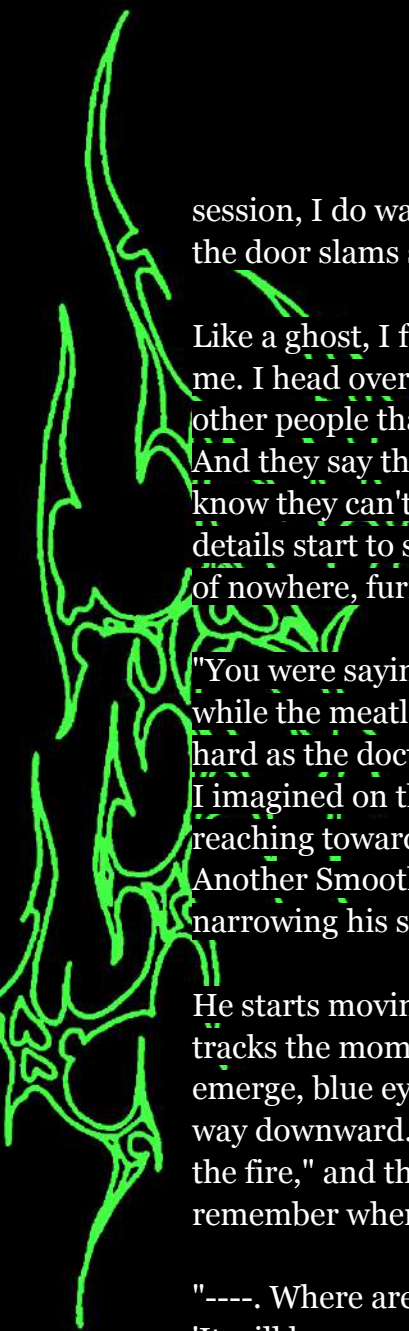
--in my mind is only of me yelling out "fuck, fuck, fuck," as I feel that cold air almost crushing my lungs, the cross of hot heat in my body, and my sweat freezing to my face making me all the more uncomfortable. There should be a road under my feet, or trees around, or street lights or something, but it's just snow, everywhere out on the horizon in front of me, and in back of me?

"Just focus," the doctor says, and I realize that I'm breathing too fast for air to get to my muscles right now—I slow up my breathing and I continue.

"The sky above has no clouds, but no light shining down. No stars. It's just an endless expanse of black where there isn't snow. It crushes too easily under my feet. I turn for a moment and see an eye. An eye the size of a—"



"Time's up," he says. I stand up and walk toward the door, the tiles beneath me snow-white, noticing the walls full of those ridiculous posters. No windows, though. No windows anywhere in the behavioral unit. I push open the heavy steel door and right before it shuts behind me, he has enough time to say "before you come back next



session, I do want you to be able to admit that there wasn't anything behind you," and the door slams shut.

Like a ghost, I float through the facility, going through the motions that are expected of me. I head over to the group session, orange hard plastic chairs in the current cell. I see other people that I can't recognize the faces of. Like they're smooth faces made of puddy. And they say things like "hi, I'm ----. I'm getting better. The dreams aren't real, and I know they can't hurt me but every once in a while, every once in a while," and little details start to sharpen out of the smooth surface, but the doctor seems to apparate out of nowhere, furrowing his brow at the speaker.

"You were saying," the doctor says to them. They speak, saying, "ah, uh. Every once in a while the meatloaf here gives me indigestion." The group laughs, but no one guffaws as hard as the doctor. But I stare forward, catching the eye of the doctor. What little details I imagined on the speaker's face turn into a smooth, pale egg again. Their hands shake, reaching toward their pocket, almost certainly where a pack of cigarettes is. Another Smoothhead becomes the speaker now as the doctor's face turns to me, narrowing his stone gray eyes.


He starts moving toward me, no swing in step, if he is even walking, but he stops in his tracks the moment the next Smoothhead starts speaking—I look at this speaker's face emerge, blue eyes red hair, red stubble on his cleft chin and a nose that slopes a long way downward. He starts screaming "It brings the fire with it! It's coming and bringing the fire," and the doctor turns to him with anger I haven't seen since... I can't even remember when.

"----. Where are your medications, have you taken them today?"

'It will burn us all to ash,' I can hear being spoken directly into my ears in a familiar voice. Is it mine? I can't remember. The doc's probably right. He's probably. No. I rub my hands down my face as the doctor draws closer to the speaker. He calls for an orderly to bring a paper cup full of the medication to help the situation. The orderly drops by in almost an instant, and he forces these pills down this speaker's throat while he keeps screaming "It brings the fire! It will burn us!"

Why does that feel familiar?

He stops screaming when he is made to swallow. He sobs deep into his own hands as the doctor rubs his back, as if to say "there, there," but with no such comforting words. And when he finally stops sobbing, the speaker's head returns to its previous position, bald of all features it had when screaming.



Am I imagining all of this? Is his face real? Am I...



Goddamnit the meds are strong today.

It gets to me being the speaker. But instead of saying anything, I stare forward, paralyzed by my inability to keep myself even while the rest of the speakers go on about their fake recovery. Making little jokes to pretend that this is normal will never be in my wheelhouse, especially while I'm here. The doctor stares at me for a moment, before swiftly approaching and saying directly to me "Enrique, everyone so far has shared. Do you think you're some kind of exception here?" I continue to stare forward. The doctor's face shifts, he writes something onto a clipboard as he says "you know, Enrique, I can't guarantee that your treatment will be short if you don't do the work."

I can't think of anything more confounding than the idea of being here another second longer. At this point, I guess to survive I've got to pretend, so I try to say something, but my lips quiver without my control for a moment. I swallow, and then start mumbling out, but the doctor says. "We can't hear you, Enrique."

"It's not real," I say, and that's all I can get out while all these smooth faces stare at me, along with those disgusting gray eyes.

"What's not real," the doctor says, the bass in his voice booming a lot louder.


"The Bl... The Bla- W-what brings the f-" And I take a deep breath and run over to the trash can, emptying my guts before fading to black.



Probably the first sleep I've had since I've been here. I still don't dream. It's just blank while I sleep, there's nothing there, and when I awake, the doctor is looking over my chart.

"Welcome back," he says and I can hear the sneer barely masked behind his clipboard from the doorway. "I've switched out your medications," he says, "apparently the aripiprazole doesn't agree with your stomach."

He's making that up. That's not a real thing. Is it? I look down at the bruises along my limbs and my sides, digging the pain out of one to try to keep myself from falling to... something. How long have I been here? How many times have I fallen over? Where is there a cast on my leg? When did that happen?

I stare at the doctor with a familiar anger. "My name is Ricky. Not Enrique," and suddenly I'm on the floor, the cold tiles pressed against the left side of my face, a lukewarm gray hand pushing down on my flesh.





“One Enrique Aldana-Salazar doesn’t get to change his name,” The doctor insists. His hands are bigger than they should be, his thumb curled over my jaw and blocking my mouth from opening. And I’m back in my chair, with him in front of me on his chair, saying “Did you say something, Enrique?”

He smiles a coffee stained grin. He disconnects his keycard and gently sets it on the desk. This moment lasts for far too long before he clears his throat in a heavy phlegm way. Ugh. He stands up from his seat and walks over to a set of shades I have never noticed in his office before. He pulls the shades up slowly. My jaw drops as I see the outside world. Flames and carbon trees surround what at first looks like the snowy ground, but as I look closer, skulls. Tons of them, these trees have to have grown through them, the sky is red, the moon is cracked in half, and—

“Enrique, what do you see out there,” I hear threatening any grip I have left. “Because it’s a blue sky out there with a few light clouds.”

He’s right. I think. My vision adjusts to match this description. “You’re right,” I hear myself saying. I start describing the little lilies he claims are to the right and the evergreens he sees on the left but I see an eye the size of mountains staring at me, it’s gaze burning holes in me. I reach up to touch my face and it’s bare of any features. I want to give up. I want to walk into the shadow and pass out of existence. But I can’t let that thing win, whatever it is. There’s still fire in me, even though there’s fire out there.

I dare not speak, but it is in me to send signals to my brain saying, “run” and my legs follow, I snatch the loose keycard and make my way through like 20 doors, with orderlies screaming and thundering toward my back, I can almost feel scalpels and needles barely grazing my skin and I run until I reach the snowy outside.

Cold, dark and alone again, I see the massive eye stare at me. My skin starts to radiate heat.

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Cleopatra (1917)
 is considered
 one of the most
 sought after
 lost films.

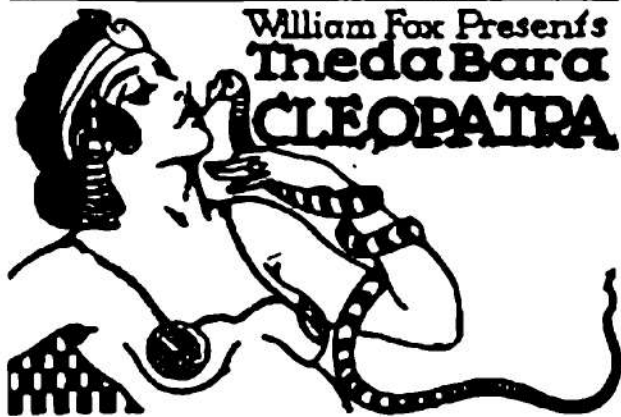
It will likely
 never be found.



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HOUDINI Magazine's
GOth HALL OF FAME

THEDA BARA



**Our first inductee in to the
Goth hall of fame.
It all started with her.**

Jacques Derrida initially used "hauntology" for his idea of the atemporal nature of Marxism and its tendency to "haunt Western society from beyond the grave".

Theda Bara, born Theodosia Burr Goodman in 1885, Cincinnati, Ohio, wasn't just a silent film star—she was the blueprint. The ORIGINAL VAMP. The silver screen femme fatale, the sultry, dangerous woman who owned pre-code Hollywood and haunted the imagination. HOUDINI Magazine pegs her as the godmother of goth, a claim that holds weight when you dig into her vibe. This OG video vixen wasn't chasing victorian beauty standards. Theda was unapologetic, a predator with eyeliner-rimmed eyes and an aura that still lingers in the goth subculture's DNA.

She's hauntological. Her whole existence is a *ghost of a ghost*.

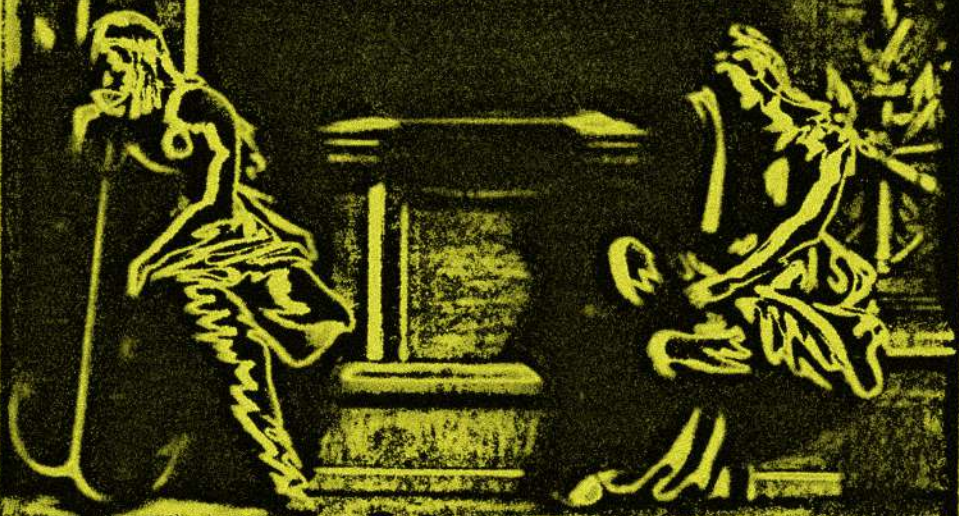
The term "vamp" got its cultural sting from her—because Theda wasn't just sultry, she was dangerous, seductive, and allegedly from the sands of Egypt, according to a studio bio cooked up in a Hollywood PR fever dream.

Almost all her films are lost. Gone. Burned in a massive studio fire. Eaten by time. 40+ films, and only a 6 survived. You can't binge-watch her on Criterion. All that's left are a few fragments and stills—sepia-toned ghosts of her looking straight through the lens like she already knows your secrets.

On a Walk

I always see dead birds on walks,
I know why they are dead.
The heat is fierce, no water flows,
All blacktop, all cement.

The mind does wonder,
lost in thought—
The last song of a dead bird,
Scared, alone, bedwetter cooing.



WYNDY

PICO-8 HORROR DOUBLE FEATURE

IT CAME FROM ITCH.IO!



Wrongkynd
Author: Atygeek



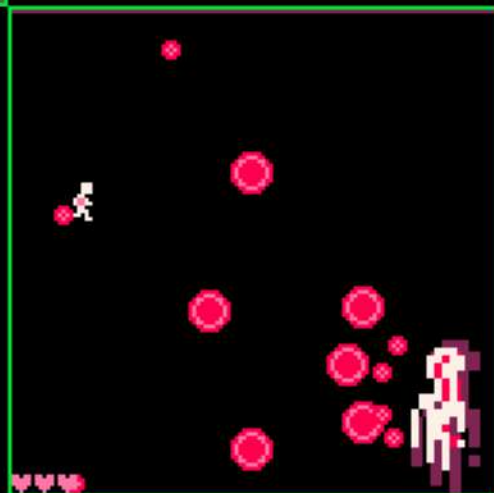
YOU MUST FEED!
Wrongkynd is a horror themed Pico-8 arcade game where you play as an eldritch horror with one purpose: EAT PEOPLE!



**Don't Dig Up
The Dead**
Author: Morning Toast



Room n Shoot?
Horror Shmup?
Vamp-em-up?
Whatever genre you decide to call this, it's an interesting blend of genres wrapped up in a horror atmosphere.



A photograph of two individuals in hooded clothing standing in an urban environment. The person on the left is wearing a light-colored hoodie and pants, while the person on the right is wearing a dark hoodie and pants. Both faces are obscured by black bars. The background features a brick wall and a metal fence. A yellow sign with the number '125' and '15' is visible on the wall. The text '[HOUDINI]' is overlaid in the top right corner.

[HOUDINI]

**NO FACE,
NO CASE.**