

FRAGMENTED SUBJECTIVITY

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*Essay by
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FRAGMENTED SUBJECTIVITY

The transition from modernism to postmodernism caused a fundamental shift in our cultural pathology, argued Fredric Jameson in the early 90s, whereby the alienated subject was superseded by a fragmented subject.¹ Whatever postmodernism was—whether a rejection or the radicalisation of modernity, the beginning or the end of history—now lies behind us, or still awaits us. Yet against a backdrop of proliferating power mechanisms and subjectification machines of global capital, with digital technologies increasingly fragmenting our perception of political crises, Jameson’s diagnosis still holds valid. If “fragmented subjectivity” continues to be the pathological mode of our times—as this year’s curated-by festival title suggests—how are recent economic, political, and aesthetic conditions shaping it, and what are its potentials, contradictions, and pitfalls? The following fragments have no conclusive answers, but offer brief slices of contemporary contexts through which to consider the ambivalences of fragmented subjectivity in our digitally and economically mediated present—and to give these thoughts a form: the form of the fragmentary.

FRAGMENTATION, ALIENATION AND ANXIETY

Jameson attributes the shift from an alienated to a fragmented subjectivity to the postmodern positive affects of euphoria, intoxication, and hallucinogenic intensity replacing the negative modern affects of anxiety, dread, and *being-toward-death*. At the same time, categories shift from temporal to spatial—a boundless spatialisation overrides temporal organisation, breaking our relationship to history. The aura of the simulacrum usurps the experience of the here and now, infusing both the present and history with the enchantment and detachment of a “glossy image”. In the midst of this new aesthetic simulation, the fragmented subject finds itself “in a countercultural ‘bad trip’ in which psychic fragmentation is raised to a qualitatively new power, the structural distraction of the decentered subject now promoted to the very motor and existential logic of late capitalism itself.”² This may sound familiar and topical in a simulated present where history is repressed and fascist fantasies become hyperreal, the glossy image of it culminating in an AI-generated Studio Ghibli deportation cartoon. And yet, the bad trip in today’s “late capitalism”, perhaps better described as “high capitalism”, feels different. The general dysphoria and alienation caused by economic abstractions and social media contradict Jameson’s hypothesis of the waning of the negative affects of modernity. The classic “feelings of disenchantment” that once marked radical alienation from the wage-labour system have not disappeared but instead now seem perversely externalised and repurposed for capitalist production, as Paolo Virno observes: “Fears of particular dangers, if only virtual ones, haunt the workday like a mood that cannot be escaped. This fear, however, is transformed into an operational requirement, a special tool of the trade. Insecurity about one’s place during periodic innovation, fear of losing recently gained privileges, and anxiety over being ‘left behind’ translate into flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself.”³ The dynamic adaptability of capital allows it to disguise and distort, integrate and utilise the negativity it produces. And yet

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1 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 14.
 2 Ibid., S. 117.
 3 Paolo Virno, cited in Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge (Mass.): London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 4.

these negative affects offer moments of resistance, as they point to real social antagonisms and symptoms at the edges of whatever capitalism fails to subsume. What if fragmented subjectivity is not a liberation from negative affects, a state of positive intensity, but in fact a symptom of this negativity? The logic and motor through which capital reproduces itself, while also the force that disrupts its mutations? Perhaps art can offer us a way to observe and experience these ambivalent workings of fragmentation and alienation.

ATTENTION AND DISTRACTION

Long before digital social networks, Jameson referred to the mediated experience of the fragmented subject, the “messiness” of constant interruption and distraction of life. He saw the temporality of video art as “something like Benjaminian ‘distraction’ raised to a new and historically original power”.⁴ His observation of attention dispersion echoes Jonathan Crary’s depiction of modernity as an ongoing crisis and reorganisation of attention, where subjectivity constantly reforms based on current conditions. Both attention and distraction are pushed to new limits, while new techniques for managing and regulating them emerge in parallel.⁵ Historically, art has taken on various roles throughout this process “as a form of distraction; as the very opposite of distraction/entertainment; and more recently as the model for a more complicated form of ‘distracted attention’.”⁶ Walter Benjamin recognised that art can be effective in both contemplative and distracted states, but our critical perception of art is still dominated by the ideology of contemplative immersion or absorption – a focussed, hierarchical attention set on acquisition and control of the object – recently described by Claire Bishop as “normative attention”. She compares this to the “hybrid attention” of the digital present – simultaneously present and mediated, live and online, fleeting and profound, individual and collective. In an attempt to historicise contemporary art, Bishop cites various strategies that artists use in response to these evolutions in reception and production, including *aggregation* (installations that amass more material than can be cognitively processed), *duration* (performances that span weeks), and *disruption* (interventions designed primarily for media circulation).⁷ Attention is inextricably linked to our understanding of subjectivity. Mastering its object with a fixed gaze, the modern subject is one of ownership, control, and optical sovereignty: a subject of enlightened consciousness. Whereas torn between focus and distraction, seeing and being seen, we could think of the contemporary subject as one of alienation and optical failure: a subject of the unconscious.

FRAGMENTATION IN THE FIELD OF VISION

The concept of fragmented subjectivity evokes the image of the disjointed body of Lacan’s mirror stage theory, when a child recognises its own reflection for the first time and feels a sense of identity and control over its body at the sight. Identification with this image compensates for its own fragmentation, but introduces an otherness in the subject and leads to a split that can never be bridged or unified.

The divided, unstable image also represents a loss and a particular dilemma within language. For Lacan, language is not a neutral medium of commu-

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4 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 87.

5 Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 13-14.

6 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), p. 178.

7 Claire Bishop, *Disordered Attention: How We Look at Art and Performance* (London/New York: Verso, 2024).

nication between subjects, but rather produces subjects by drawing them in to its own antagonising, contradicting impossibilities. If the unconscious is structured like a language it will always question our ability to judge an image as pure or distorted, our reliance on language to be true or false, our male or female identities.

Artistic and curatorial practices that engage with themes of fragmented subjectivity highlight how a lack of visual and linguistic representation links to the ontological uncertainty of sexuality—exposing “the fixed nature of sexual identity as a fantasy and, in the same gesture, to trouble, break up, or rupture the visual field before our eyes.”⁸

NEGATIVITY VS IDENTITY

Current identity politics challenge the divided psychoanalytical subject with the assertion of an unbroken, coherent subject. In psychoanalysis, the alienated, non-identity is politicised as where the subjective and social, personal and political converge, whereas liberal identity politics promises to liberate identity from non-identity, i.e. to abolish difference. Contemporary art also seems to seek refuge in the promise of a solid, authentic identity as both the orientation and goal for artistic and political action.

But the way out of this dilemma is surely not to retreat into dreamy irrationality stripped of any political awareness echoing Dean Kissick’s suggestion that: “we are irrational, incoherent beings [...] free to dream anything. To build different worlds, to whisper enticements in many ears, to try to destroy reality [...] There is still so much to imagine.”⁹ For one, increasing cancellations, censorship, and funding cuts in the art and cultural sphere demonstrate that “incoherent artistic subjects” are not, in fact, “free to dream anything”—say, for instance, a free Palestine. Beyond this, creating different worlds requires more than the false, magical illusions of fantasy; as Marina Vishmidt constantly reminded us, it requires the *negativity of speculation*. In this financialised present, where the speculative logics of art are inextricably linked to the speculative potential of the market, art can have a socially speculative effect where identities are not affirmed, but dismantled through “dis-identification, exacerbation and singularization”.¹⁰ Speculation is thus not a pure imagining of possibilities, but an antagonistic, conflicted process of grappling with current social conditions, as Zoe Sutherland observes: “The subject cannot be found through ‘identity thinking’ nor ‘wished away’ through theoretical ruptures; only overcome through a living, social praxis, which necessarily unfolds as ‘painful contradiction’. The capital relation might be the social horizon of the reproduction of identities, but this horizon is not totalising; it is contradictory and constitutively incomplete.”¹¹

FRAGMENT AND DISASTER

In a present of painful contradictions, the fragmentary allows us to think these contradictions and to give form to contradictory thinking. Maurice Blanchot contends that fragmentary writing rejects the law of non-contradiction, for it is through contradiction that he liberates his writing from the law of completion. *When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruin of words, demise writing,*

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- 8 Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the field of vision* (1986), in: *Visual Culture: The Reader*, eds. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London, California, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1999), p. 412.
- 9 Dean Kissick, *The Painted Protest: How politics destroyed contemporary art*, Harper’s Magazine, Dec. 2024), pp. 23–30.
- 10 Marina Vishmidt, *Art, Value, Subjects, Reasons. Some Aspects of Speculation as Production*, in: Simon Baier and Markus Klammer (eds.), *Aesthetics of Equivalence* (Berlin: August Verlag, 2023), p. 123.
- 11 Zoe Sutherland, *Against running in place: The speculative thought of Marina Vishmidt* *Radical Philosophy* 218, Spring 2025, p. 47.

*faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains (the fragmentary).*¹²

In a time of disaster, in which the disaster must not be named, the fragmentary can be a means to say the impossible and escape powerlessness.

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