



Volume 1, Issue 2, September 2018

**Abstract**

**Keywords**

**Charlie Brooker Meets  
Karl Kraus after  
the End of the World**

Joe Weiss

Appalachian State University

[weissjm1@appstate.edu](mailto:weissjm1@appstate.edu)

## 1. Cyborg Man<sup>1</sup>

Has every conversation in history been just a series of beeps?  
—Brooker, *The Guardian*

IF Karl Kraus was, as Brecht once observed, the hand that performed the suicide of an age, then perhaps Charlie Brooker is the apparition that remains when, as Kraus himself

---

<sup>1</sup> The original draft of this essay was completed just prior to the 2016 release of Charlie Brooker's new *Black Mirror* episodes. It could, therefore, only address the films from series one and two, and the special from 2014. Brooker, *Black Mirror* (UK: Zeppotron, 2011-2014), Channel 4. Hereafter, all individual episodes will be cited within the body of the text with italics. Since this essay was not conceived as a mere summary of Brooker's work taken as a whole, the manner in which it fails to be "up-to-date" should not, in the author's estimation, be grounds for repudiation. Echoing with Walter Benjamin's selective usage of Kraus' corpus, such limits in scope might even better equip it with the capacity to highlight some of the aesthetic tensions that have arguably lapsed in both Season 3 of *Black Mirror* and the last iteration of Brooker's *Wipes*, the 2016 *Wipe*. For, as is now becoming evident, the early Brooker is qualitatively different from the present Brooker, if the present Brooker is Brooker at all, and not, on the contrary, Brooker the company-man, whose name and brand have been siphoned through the circuitry of the same production mechanism against which he once railed. This difference becomes especially noteworthy when one juxtaposes the material preconditions of Brooker's early form of presentation to that of the current Netflix production. For instance, years of slowly mining through the film, television, and pop-cultural archives arguably needed to be accumulated before Brooker could adequately transition from televisual and editorial criticism to screenplay writing. This labor, as well as the fundamentally different audience and production demands of the publically owned and nationally endowed BBC 4, must be distinguished from the time crunch or hasty turnover of the present model, which is steered by a privately owned, US conglomerate with a predominately US-based audience. Under the threat of content being withheld from the long expected Fox and Disney merger, Netflix has been compelled since 2013 to invest considerable funds into producing their own original content. Thus, the production, editing, and directing constraints of a Netflix operation—for example, teleplays not written by Brooker himself—as well as the streamlining requirements of a streaming platform that wants to remain competitive, cannot help but alter the form and content of the artwork itself.

predicted, there are no longer hands to perform such deeds, only cyborgs armed with screens that speak the jargon and gesture the gesture of the culture industry. Kraus, embodying the last, messianic judgment against the approaching, but not yet total impoverishment of language and experience, wielded the torch that shined the light on the guilt of marching off to war amidst the possibility of emancipating nature via technology for the first time. He thus wrote *The Last Days of Mankind*.<sup>2</sup> Booker, whose art and criticism take place after the light has been extinguished, when nothing save the *Black Mirror* is held up to nature, writes in a period that, in T.W. Adorno's formulation, ought to bear the title, "After Doomsday."<sup>3</sup> Even though Kraus' work was produced when both the memory and material practice of resistance were still alive, whereas Brooker's is produced in an era that has achieved absolute social and political *séparation*, that is, the complete triumph of the "spectacle" over life,<sup>4</sup> the uncanny similarity between their works cannot be denied. Brooker's weekly and yearly *Wipes*<sup>5</sup> might as well be Kraus' *Die Fackel*

---

<sup>2</sup> Karl Kraus, *The Last Days of Mankind*, trans. Fred Bridgham and Edward Timms (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2002), 54; *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 61. Hereafter all citations of both Adorno's and Walter Benjamin's work will contain the English reference, followed by the corresponding *GS* volume and page number.

<sup>4</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995). For more on the technical concept of *séparation* in Debord, see his short film *Critique de la séparation* (Dansk-Fransk Experimentalfilm Kompagni, 1961).

<sup>5</sup> Brooker has produced many variations of these "wipes," which I am here comparing to Karl Kraus' journal, "The Torch" (*Die Fackel*). The first iteration was Brooker, *Screenwipe* (UK: Zeppotron, 2006-2016), BBC 4. This was followed by Brooker, *Newswipe* (UK: Zeppotron, 2009-2010), BBC 4. More recently, this format has morphed into "weekly" and "yearly" wipes, both of which review large

transposed for the scopophilic world, so urgent is their presentation, so committed to exposing all journalistic language and advertising for what they are: essential links in the despotism of advanced capitalism. His incessant fight against the administrated phrasemongering of the twenty-four hour “news” stream, which, today more than ever, blurs the line between reality and fiction, advertisement and event, no doubt suggests that for Brooker too the “news” carries with it the connotation of bad tidings delivered from afar, in which “war and pestilence,” “fire and flood,” and, most poignantly for us, the latest mass shooting, resound in Shakespearean pessimism.<sup>6</sup>

But this striking feature of mass society should not simply propel us to scorn a politics that, parodied in Brooker’s *National Anthem*, takes peculiar pride in following the inertia of “public opinion,” the latest piffle offered up by the shock and awe techniques of the marketplace. Walter Benjamin’s insistence that, for Kraus, a public is a judging (*richtend*) public or none at all,<sup>7</sup> must, after Brooker, drive us beyond rancor for the narrowly circumscribed “press,” whose printer’s ink was of course steeped in blood at the turn of the last century. For in the era of monopoly capital, the symptom, which is itself the cause, the “media,” which is itself the event, is now the TV screen on which the spectacle perpetuates its pomp and circumstance in every realm of life, the demarcation line between the masquerading politicians of the “public sphere,”

---

swaths of “current events” and “entertainment news” as they are presented on television. Brooker, *Weekly Wipe* (UK: Zeppotron, 2013-present), BBC 2.

<sup>6</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 433-458, 433; “Karl Kraus,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 334-367, 334.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 433/ GS2.1: 335

the run-of-the-mill Instagram and Twitter feeds, and the self-styling starlet, “who is just like you,” having long been obliterated.<sup>8</sup> What is worse, this stream, which, like the written press, was never the fourth estate of a democratically organized society, and does not, therefore, neutrally transfer a mere message, mere information, but rather mediates every aspect of social intercourse from within the narrow dictates of private property—this stream is now accompanied, as if to maintain the veneer of happy-go-lucky innocuousness, by a music at once more gaudy and bombastic than Kraus, to say nothing of Goebbels, could begin to imagine. Heeding and, in turn, mimetically modulating this musical underside to the images of the spectacle economy, Brooker’s mode of presentation is virtually the only response that begins to give expression to the contemporary form of the culture industry, that is, the contemporary form of domination, and this above all in the films from his television program, *Black Mirror*, and his six part documentary series, *How TV Ruined your Life*.<sup>9</sup>

A hatred such as that which Brooker has levelled against this system of domination grows progressively more

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Karl Kraus, “In these Great Times,” in *In these Great Times*, ed. Harry Zohn (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1984)75-76: “Is the press a messenger? No, it is the event itself. A speech? No, life itself.... It is not a messenger (how could a messenger demand and receive so much?); it is the event itself. Once again the instrument has got the better of us.”

<sup>9</sup> Charlie Brooker, *How TV Ruined your Life* (UK: Zeppotron, 2011), BBC Two. Hereafter, all individual episodes will be referred to in the body of the text in italics. Very few thinkers have taken seriously this conception of the culture industry as domination, that is, as the social form through which, at the present level of accumulation, all social interaction is mediated and subsumed. For a rare exception that, in other words, avoids compartmentalizing the culture industry as if it were a manipulative or propagandistic sphere that is simply added onto “reality” in order to deceive, see Shane Gunster, *Capitalizing on Culture: Critical Theory for Cultural Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

dubious in the face of precisely this form of social schematization. It is prototypically represented in the character of the Grumbler (*Nörgler*) from Kraus' *Last Days*, the spoilsport who reminds us that "there's a war on." The early Twentieth Century satirist thus anticipates Brooker's refrain that he, the powerless critic, a *Trauerspieler* alone in his chair, is "thirty-nine years old and bickering with the news."<sup>10</sup> The *denouement* soliloquy to the *Fifteen Million Merits* episode of *Black Mirror*, arguably Brooker's magnum opus, drives this form of disenchantment into the new millennium. Bing, a character ostensibly named for his similarity to the Microsoft search engine, as well as the computer sound-effect that signals cashing in on "likes," that is, the "merits," or abstract quantity of a society powered on the labor of conspicuous consumption, is a jilted lover. The source of his frustration is, more specifically, a love lost to the erotic temptation of the culture industry, which, in updated form, turns on the false dichotomy between the domestic nightmare portrayed in both *The Entire History of You* and *Be Right Back* and the misogynistic sexualization immanent to virtually every "social" networking and entertainment opportunity. Indeed, "anyone who knows what love is," will understand that one accrues value by adjusting to the reified gender roles of a rape culture, by uncompromisingly introjecting the meaning of the commercials, "horror-content [...] in extract form,"<sup>11</sup> and by laboring without end. Life become a reality television program is not, for Bing, for all of us, just the fulfillment of the "great

---

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998); *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* in GS1.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 203-430; Brooker, "Knowledge," in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>11</sup> Kraus, "The World of Posters," in *In these Great Times*, ed. Harry Zohn (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1984), 42-47, 44.

times," the slavish necessity of which Kraus predicted would one day produce "opinion free from spirit [*Geist*], entertainment free from art, and orgies free from love."<sup>12</sup> It is equally, as Adorno and Horkheimer already foresaw, a circumstance in which aspiration regresses to a longing to win the empty prize, to be the fortunate recipient of the talent scout's decree, despite and because of the fact that today the "element of blindness in the routine decision about which song is to be a hit, which extra a heroine,"<sup>13</sup> is as obvious as approbation from one's peers, one's "rivals," is impossible.<sup>14</sup> Drawn inexorably, in this way, to the truth of the world of advertisements, Bing seems to be nothing other than the afterimage of Kraus, who, assaulted from every direction by the posters (*Plakate*) in Vienna, hears a gun dealer at last drown out the din of the vertiginous slogans: "Be your own murderer."<sup>15</sup>

Will Bing oblige? Surely he won't be compliant like all the rest? Or will he? His need for something "real," compounded by life in a jail cell, a "death box"<sup>16</sup> where one speaks only to other avatars on the screen, cannot help but bring him, expression of collective agony, to the brink of suicide. Shard of the black mirror held to his throat, threatening false authority, confronting the smarmy host of the game-show, the "sanctioned hate sponge" who provides

---

<sup>12</sup> Kraus, "In these Great Times," 74.

<sup>13</sup> T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 117; *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 168.

<sup>14</sup> Brooker, "Aspiration," in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>15</sup> Kraus, "The World of Posters," 47.

<sup>16</sup> Brooker, "Aspiration," in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

outlet for the doggedly indignant,<sup>17</sup> he begins, as if Socrates before the tribunal, insisting on his straight-shooting authenticity:

I haven't got a speech, I didn't plan words, I didn't even try to. I just knew that I had to get here, to stand here and I knew I wanted you to listen; to really listen, not just pull a face like you're listening, like you do the rest of the time. A face like you're feeling instead of processing. You pull a face and poke it towards the stage and, la-di-da we sing and dance and tumble around and all you see up here—it's not people, you don't see people up here, it's all fodder. And the faker the fodder is, the more you love it because fake fodder's the only thing that works anymore, fake fodder is all that we can stomach— actually not quite all. Real pain, real viciousness, that we can take. Yeah, stick a fat man up a pole and we'll laugh ourselves feral 'cause we've earned the right, we've done cell time and he's slacking, the scum, so ha-ha-ha at him. 'Cause we're so out of our minds with desperation we don't know any better. All we know is fake fodder and buying shit. That's how we speak to each other, how we express ourselves is buying shit. I have a dream? The peak of our dreams is a new hat for our *Doppel*, a hat that doesn't exist. It's not even there, we buy shit that's not even there. Show us something real and free and beautiful, you couldn't. It'd break us, we're too numb for it, our minds would choke. There's only so much wonder we can bear, that's why when you find any wonder whatsoever you dole it out in meager portions, and only then till it's augmented and packaged and pumped through ten thousand pre-assigned filters, till it's nothing more than a meaningless series of lights, while we ride day-in, day-out —going where? Powering what? All tiny cells in tiny screens and

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

bigger cells in bigger screens and fuck you! Fuck you, that's what it boils down to: is fuck you. Fuck you for sitting there and slowly making things worse. Fuck you and your spotlight and your sanctimonious faces and fuck you all, for taking the one thing I ever came close to anything real about anything. For oozing around it and crushing it into a bone, into a joke, one more ugly joke in a kingdom of millions and then fuck you. Fuck you for happening. Fuck you for me, for us, for everyone, fuck you!<sup>18</sup>

All of Brooker's creations gravitate around this crescendo. Few other moments in art approach Kraus' "silence turned inside out" so closely.<sup>19</sup> The expressionless pause that resounds after the last denunciation has fallen away speaks with more force than any positive determination of utopia could. Its language of collective redemption—"for us, for everyone"—rescues the idea of communism from the grip of the fascist aestheticization of politics.<sup>20</sup> This is deepened by the immanent development of the musical score itself. Each day the peddling ads take their tedious toll, especially since they are guided by music such as Stephen McKeon's, which at first listen harkens to another in a series of kiddy-wink ditties by Phillip Glass, so seamlessly does it glide, via cityscape and smiley-face montages, from *Fifteen Million Merits* to the latest IBM and Lexus spots. And yet, the unresolved contrast between the required, revolutionary hatred and the *ennui* of

---

<sup>18</sup> Brooker, "Fifteen Million Merits," in *Black Mirror*.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 436/ GS2.1: 338.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 251-283, 270; "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit: Dritte Fassung," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 471-508, 508.

the minimalist piano, the turning in circles that is not yet distinguishable as a naiveté still full of romantic hope or outright melancholia, finally bursts apart in Bing's fury. One recalls a similar brooding from Daryl Griffith's musical introduction to each *How TV Ruined your Life* installment, where the accompanying image is Sisyphus chained to a television instead of a rock. For a moment, when juxtaposed to Bing, the sorrow of these themes, expressing the sorrow and immobility of objective spirit, reverses into sadism and action. With a destruction (*Zerstörung*) that would wipe away all injustice behind it, the unambiguous truth—intimated in the gathering momentum of Bing's regeneration theme—at last comes to the fore. Things really are that bad. And everyone knows it, since everyone shares in this desperate loneliness.

“The spectacle,” as Guy Debord wrote, “is the bad dream of modern society in chains, expressing nothing more than its wish for sleep.”<sup>21</sup> Bing, a black man, subject of modernity, has in this respect attempted to awaken us from the nightmare. When, however, Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream has been warped, as *Aspiration* highlights, into a new line of cologne called “I am King” disseminated by the mass ornament known as P-Diddy, the real subsumption of the value-form has defeated him before he has begun. All the world collapses with the simplicity of a lovelorn R&B song. Its echo is a remix that lasts forever. Bing's regeneration theme loses its momentum and reveals the stasis, the spell of aimless labor, it always was. Nothing is regenerated but the spotlight under which the nameless persona compete.<sup>22</sup> Both the uniform

time-signature of sixties nostalgia and the gloom of the A minor down-beat begin, to a T, with the first exertion of the unending work-day. The hope of emancipation, the horizon of Kraus and King Jr.'s universal man (*Allmensch*), is blotted out, except for the *Doppel* on the glossy screen, which is enough to spur the labor of and for this bad infinity. “The film sparks a fashion craze,” continues Debord, foreseeing the entwinement of video games and cinema, as well as the explosion of so-called franchise products, “or a magazine launches a chain of clubs that in turn spins off a line of products. The sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass commodities become more and more absurd, absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right.”<sup>23</sup> People, not just the famous heart-throbs, are the ideology, the justification, of the system. They are themselves so-called click-bait, which feverishly draws attention to the next purchasing occasion.<sup>24</sup> Everything they wear and do, including their impeccable physique, has already been neatly catalogued and packaged from above into life-style choices that at once require brand loyalty and the maintenance of class-based tastes.<sup>25</sup>

A similar logic can be detected in one of the “super giant stars” in the “galaxy of fame,”<sup>26</sup> who, telling the truth of

---

<sup>23</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> Charlie Brooker, “This Awesome Dissection of Internet Hyperbole will make you Cry and Change your Life,” last modified October 6, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/06/internet-hyperbole-charlie-brooker>.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Brooker, “Aspiration,” in *How TV Ruined your Life*. This depiction of a “galaxy of fame” is strikingly similar to Adorno's depiction of the exploitative hero-worship of the culture industry. See T.W. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 98-106, 101; Résumé über Kulturindustrie, in *Gesammelte*

---

<sup>21</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” 450/ GS2.1: 357-58: “Like Timon's verse, Kraus' poetry stands opposite the double-point (*Doppelpunkt*) of the *dramatis persona*, of the role” (translation modified).

the Selma marches, thinks that gold is the epitome of her self-expression.<sup>27</sup> When, as the song goes, she “had a dream” and, despite it all, believed in angels, we hardly suspect that anything sinister is afoot, especially given her steadfast devotion to Fourier’s promise that, under socialism, “seawater,” becoming lemonade, “would no longer taste salty.”<sup>28</sup> But when a new line of clothing produced by factory labor in an undisclosed location is launched by this same empowering, feminist and anti-racist brand with a *Blitzkrieg* timing so meticulously coordinated that it makes the board chairmen of the only other combine backed by a comparable quantity of capital, the military, blush—no one flinches. No one is moved to cry: graven image! For hell on earth has been transformed into a “promotional trip,” and everyone is guaranteed to “receive unforgettable impressions of a world in which there is not a square centimeter of soil that has not been torn up by grenades and advertisements.”<sup>29</sup> Forget the unspeakable suffering to which all sham empowerment is dialectically tethered. The screams and laughter of the tortured and dispossessed coalesce into one deafening tone. To distinguish them is to misunderstand the “supreme aesthetic

---

*Schriften*, vol. 10.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 337-345, 341.

<sup>27</sup> This character from *Fifteen Million Merits* is named Selma Telse. As I will explore below, this suggests that Brooker is playing on the violence and resulting bastardization of the civil rights and black power movements of the Sixties. By almost every conceivable measure, the aspirations of the Selma marches for voting freedom have been crushed, reduced to another type of powerless voting. For more on this and related themes, see Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389-400, 394; “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” in *GS1.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 691-706, 699.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Kraus, “Promotional Trips to Hell,” in *In These Great Times*, 93.

pleasure”<sup>30</sup> at work not only in witnessing but also listening to the annihilation of a civilization that has “run out of tears but not of laughter.”<sup>31</sup>

Surely, the circuits must remain jammed, then? Surely, Bing, the exception, has punctured more than the surface? Far from it. There is only surface, and tarrying with it as Kraus insisted long before McLuhan, Baudrillard, and Jameson, accomplishes nothing.<sup>32</sup> The silence lasts about as long as one is permitted to mourn in this world. The speed with which the outrage is reabsorbed into the production process evokes a picture—the negative of today—from Kraus’ time. Eyewitness accounts are given of how a substantial number of French mothers whose sons were killed in the trenches of the First World War were compelled to wear black funeral gowns for the rest of their lives.<sup>33</sup> Impossible to grieve under these conditions, nothing could ever be the same. Business as usual, or the endlessly blaring “symphony on the theme of money circulating,” was too paralyzing.<sup>34</sup> Why should one fret over death, over loss, any more? Today “social” media, the memory of the general intellect, can gather every tidbit from your posts, every nuance, down to the singular inflection of your

---

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 270/ *GS1.2*: 508.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” 448/ *GS2.1*: 355.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Kraus, “In Praise of a Topsy-Turvy Life-Style,” in *In These Great Times*, 37: “The world has become uglier since it began to look into a mirror every day; so let us settle for the mirror image and do without an inspection of the original”; Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effect* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Philippe Ariès, “Les grandes étapes et le sens de l’évolution de nos attitudes devant la mort,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* no. 39 (1975): 7-15.

<sup>34</sup> Kraus, “Topsy-Turvy Life-Style,” 36.

voice, be they from text messages, email, Twitter, or Facebook. Moreover, Sony has just patented contact lenses that can record everything you see. There's no need for a "grain" implant. In the age of technical reproduction, which, against Benjamin's hope, has proven to be the age of the Iron Heel, the algorithm knows you better than yourself.<sup>35</sup> Or, as *Be Right Back* makes clear, you are nothing but an input in an algorithm determined by a more general algorithm. The "leaden boredom" of bourgeois marriage is not betrayed by the impossibility of the cyborg emulating a *real* human being, who never, in truth, existed.<sup>36</sup> Commodity production, of necessity colonizing every exterior and interior space, annihilates all individuation along with the aura. Partners become "underwhelming content delivery system[s]," merping and beeping out the next complaint, without anyone there to explain the objective alienation that is their source.<sup>37</sup> With the same petrified fear that is at the origin of private property, the character Martha attempts to preserve what is irretrievably lost. The pre-history of bourgeois society, the essence of which the young Marx already grasped as a security that can, in fact, never be secured, triumphs yet again.<sup>38</sup> Thus the cyborg itself, a "living" promo, implores Martha to purchase the technical upgrade that is the only path to love and satisfaction. Thus we learn, with Brooker, that the eternity of ads means the end of mourning.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> See Jack London, *The Iron Heel* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 26, eds. James S. Allen, et al. (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 178

<sup>37</sup> Brooker, "Love," in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 230.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

Above all else, then, it is this productively inconsolable condition that, far from being set in the future, is the basis of the hot shot host's decision to offer Bing his own *spectacle*, his own prime-time show. Nothing else should ever be expected, so long as technology is constrained by the antiquated relations of production. Why not use this as another opportunity to generate revenue? The mothers of the slain will get a cut this time around. Besides, increased wages no longer appear as golden chains. The final solution to all social ills has, therefore, become more and more transparent. As Adorno and Horkheimer observed as early as 1945:

[r]ealistic indignation [*Realitätsgerechte Empörung*] is the trademark [*Warenmarke*] of those with a new idea to sell. The public sphere of present society allows only those complaints to be heard in which the attentive ear can discern the prominent figure under whose protection the rebel [*Empörte*] is suing for peace. The more immeasurable the gulf between chorus and leaders, the more certainly is there a place among the latter for anyone who demonstrates superiority by well-organized dissidence.<sup>40</sup>

This prophetic speculation into the tendencies of domination does not circumvent an underlying question: What is Bing supposed to do? Can he avoid making his suicidal tool, the shard, a relic or token of his identification with domination? What is anyone supposed to do when *praxis* is blocked by precisely this socio-political gulf between the universal and particular interest? Similarly, what options remain when, as Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt have shown, the proletariat public sphere, that is, the attempt to break out of the strictures

---

<sup>40</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 104/ GS3: 168 (translation modified).



of the spectacle economy, is always, by virtue of an inherited power differential, within a hair's breadth of being co-opted by its bourgeois counterpart?<sup>41</sup> The choice seems to be between death or embracing the upward mobility ethic pledged to all the lowly plebes. Denied any modicum of freedom, they go on bickering with one another in the quest for "audience," that is, state, recognition. Bourgeois right, after which only the rightless strive,<sup>42</sup> amounts to having equal say, equal representation in the task of meting out punishment to others. *White Bear*, which turns this into an amusement park, is only the outermost expression of a process begun long ago. The rants will, no doubt, be incorporated, well organized by capital, into the resentment-machine, which is indistinguishable from the party-machine.<sup>43</sup> Whether this is entertainment or politics is not clear. Either way, Bing's acceptance affords him a bigger home, one unlike the others, which seems to offer real, "organic" fruit, and a real view of the plush green forest. But are these windows into nature or just more screens? Kraus sounds the verdict well before Brooker would meet him after the end of the world:

Is there life beyond the posters? When a train takes us outside the city, we do see a green meadow—but this green meadow is only a poster which that lubricant manufacturer

---

<sup>41</sup> Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, et al. (New York: Verso, 2016), 54-95.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Kraus' aphorism on human rights, cited by Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 448/ GS2.1: 355: "Human rights are the fragile toy that grownups like to trample on and so will not give up."

<sup>43</sup> See Freddie deBoer, "The Resentment Machine," in *The New Inquiry* (November 2011), <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-resentment-machine/>

has concocted in league with nature in order to pay his respect to us in the country as well.<sup>44</sup>

The only difference is that today the posters have come alive. Today the sorcerer's apprentice is carrying buckets of blood, not water.<sup>45</sup> Or, more precisely, the world of posters (*Die Welt der Plakate*) has become the poster of worlds. Now every "journalistic subject," coming out of the womb "blinking and shrieking"<sup>46</sup> before a million shiny little platforms, can envision travel opportunities to exotic lands in HD, unmoved by the infernal fact that the purpose of the promotion of tourism...is the promotion of tourism.<sup>47</sup> Knowing this Krausian insight into means without ends, into the fetishization of the fetish, Brooker goes beyond simple parody. Indeed, he is fully aware of his own spectacular presence. He thus performs and uncovers the mass production schema through which the news and documentary style unfold their "worldly" (*weltbürgerlich*) perspective. "It starts here," announces Brooker, the unconscious voice of a thousand automated narrators,

with a lackluster establishment shot of a significant location. Next, a walky-talky preamble from the *auteur*, pacing steadily towards the lens, punctuating every other sentence with a hand gesture, and ignoring all the pricks milling around him, like he's gliding through the fucking matrix,

---

<sup>44</sup> Kraus, "The World of Posters," 45.

<sup>45</sup> See Karl Kraus, "The Sorcerer's Apprentices," in *In These Great Times*, 94-96. See also Karl Kraus, "Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths," trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Carcanet Press, 1986), 81: "A sorcerer's apprentice seems to have utilized the absence of his master. But now there is blood instead of water."

<sup>46</sup> Brooker, "The Lifecycle," in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>47</sup> Karl Kraus, "The Demotion of Tourism," in *In These Great Times*, 97-101.

before coming to a halt, and posing a question: what...comes...next?<sup>48</sup>

There he is, apparently Brooker as Brooker this time. We can expect the light touch of that familiar xylophone music at any moment, while our presenter sets out to overcome obstacles and learn life lessons. Of course, his voice itself and the radio-voice, his image and facsimile, have officially collapsed, along with everything else, into one steady, digital stream.<sup>49</sup> Behold: there's the green again, this time outside the window of his train car. He looks on somberly, suggesting, in case any doubts have inadvertently crept in, that there is, indeed, a meaningful arc to it all. Or is that verdure just another image projected from the rectangular TV screen? Don't say it is isn't. It is.

Unlike the profusion of ironic comedic voices, Brooker is never outside of the presentation, never speaking from on top, despite the appearance that the studio desk from his *Wipes* resembles Jon Stewart's or that of the unbearably jovial Jimmy Fallon. The "commentary" runs fluidly, immanently, from scene to scene, from before his allotted program time to after it, when the warm and conciliatory, which is to say, market-tested, voice of the BBC announces, despite Brooker's plaintive "why...why...why!" that a slew of exciting shows, complemented by sexy dance music, are slated to appear in the next hours.<sup>50</sup> Again: there is no interruption. Brooker concentrates all of his energy on this terrifying fact. Most importantly, he is never the messenger, never simply looking

for a laugh,<sup>51</sup> or feigning his moral distance, à la John Oliver, from the "accelerating viral cycle" of "breaking news."<sup>52</sup> He is no Crusoe, no Odysseus. Brooker is the only one who, in reality, satirizes the mythmakers of Robinsonades, the "twerp and the skrint," "the belming twit[s],"<sup>53</sup> who parade about daily, insisting that *real* humans are making *real* decisions about *real* life.

Anyone who has taken Brooker seriously knows that this disdain for liberal moralism, for illusory political agency, is a dominant component of his presentation. It ultimately forces him to extend his criticism to an all-too frequently neglected aspect of the culture industry's stronghold: its desecration of language.<sup>54</sup> In fidelity to misfortune (*Unglück*),<sup>55</sup> that is, against the communicative language of the "journalistic subject,"<sup>56</sup> he often moves between a scarcely recognizable British slang and a rhyming *accelerando* whose momentum and repetition erupts into borderline neologism. This is done in order to bring into sharp relief the ever-repressed, phonetic side of speech, the

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 448/ GS2.1: 354-55.

<sup>52</sup> Brooker, *2014 Wipe*.

<sup>53</sup> Brooker, "Aspiration, in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>54</sup> For a rare discussion of the connections between this desecration of language and the domination of the spectacle or culture industry, that is, between Kraus and Debord, see Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 72-88.

<sup>55</sup> Kraus, "In These Great Times," 70-71: "in these times you should not expect any words of my own from me – none but these words which barely manage to prevent silence from being misinterpreted. Respect for the immutability, the subordination of language before this misfortune [*Unglück*] is too deeply rooted in me. In the realm of the poverty of imagination [*Phantasiearmut*] where people die of spiritual famine without feeling spiritual hunger, where pens are dipped in blood and swords in ink, that which is not thought must be done, but that which is only thought is unutterable."

<sup>56</sup> Kraus, "Topsy-Turvy Life-Style," 36.

<sup>48</sup> Brooker, *Newswipe*, Series 2: Episode 2, January 26, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 345-391.

<sup>50</sup> Brooker, "Aspiration," in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

sedimented tensions of collective suffering. His cadence and alliteration, to be sure, provoke recognition of an affective onomatopoeia built into all language. But this artifice also makes the truth of his expression all the more elusive for his audience. Perhaps, they think, this is simply the result of his eccentricity. He is a curmudgeon after all. Must be his predisposition. What would you expect from a luddite?<sup>57</sup>

A similar difficulty is at work when the casual viewer struggles to differentiate between the excerpted news clips and the fabricated, acted scenes that are subtly fused into the flow of *How TV Ruined your Life*. The recent incorporation of Philomena Cunk and Barry Shitpeas as “news correspondents” to his *Wipes* disambiguates these phenomena, but the critical tension of the presentation often suffers as a result. Of course, Brooker himself is never actually “commenting” or expressing his opinion about these citations. On the contrary, as a self-conscious character-mask playing on the fallacious autonomy of every anchor, he despises the bourgeois lie of individuality in equal measure to its official chair, the real sovereign, which remains indivisible and constant, despite the transfer of power, or despite the hiring of a “new” host. “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear,” says the spectacle.<sup>58</sup> Its only imperative is simple: “keep smiling.”<sup>59</sup> No host can say or do anything else, all variations being the mere

---

<sup>57</sup> It is noteworthy that in a 2014 interview about *Black Mirror* Brooker countered this reactionary conception about the role of technology in society by insisting that “technology is never the villain” in his films.

<sup>58</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 15.

<sup>59</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 313-355, 328; “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 605-654, 631.

semblance (*Schein*) of difference, unless he or she is Brooker, who has slipped one past the censorship apparatus. In this sense, Brooker is more than the apparition that remains after the catastrophe. He is the apparition that knows what he is, that knows *détournement*, the maintenance of the fourth wall, rather than the Archimedean fantasy, is the only means at his disposal. In thus following his renunciation of the possibility of any *Verfremdungseffekt* in the medium of film, we are forced to ask whether Zog900, the automated talent judge, the penance network, the child coronation channel, Wo-Gan the cartoon, as well as all the vox pox contributions from ordinary citizens on the street, are reality or fiction.<sup>60</sup> Nobody has a definitive answer, since Brooker’s mimesis succeeds at performing just how phantasmatic both sides of the equally constructed dichotomy are. Even if these acted scenes and unrecognizable linguistic flourishes are, in other words, simulacra, they are no different, in the end, from the simulacra that comprise the “destabilized perception”<sup>61</sup> or non-linear appearances that assail us from every which way. They are not, in short, out there, standing over and against us, a pile of images “added to the real world.”<sup>62</sup> Blood of our blood, they must be understood as Kraus understood his citations:

The most improbable actions reported here really occurred. Going beyond the realm of Schillerian tragedy, I have portrayed the deeds they merely performed. The most improbable conversations conducted here were spoken word for word; the most lurid fantasies are quotations. Sentences whose insanity is indelibly imprinted on the ear have grown

---

<sup>60</sup> This is a list of some of the “fake” shows or scenes that Brooker has constructed for *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>61</sup> Brooker, *2014 Wipe*.

<sup>62</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 13.

into the music of time. The document takes human shape; reports come alive as characters and characters expire as editorials; the newspaper column has acquired a mouth that spouts monologues; platitudes stand on two legs—unlike men left with only one. An unending cacophony of sound bites engulfs a whole era and swells to a final chorale of a calamitous action.<sup>63</sup>

Brooker's work is guided at every turn by this Krausian attempt to rearrange the quotes and images of everyday life so that, following the technique of montage, they come to speak for themselves. His innermost drive could, in this way, be defined as an attempt to live up to what Benjamin described as Kraus' most pressing concern: calling a halt to the "eternally renewed, uninterrupted lament" of history.<sup>64</sup> Approaching despair, however, upon seeing televisions that talk in sound-bites only to themselves, or faced with the fact that, in Adorno's conception, "mass culture is the system of signals [*Signalanlage*] that signals [only] itself,"<sup>65</sup> Brooker aims to do more than merely teach us *How to Watch Television*.<sup>66</sup> He also attempts to make the televisions become conscious. This, he knows, can only occur through the remembrance of nature, which is indissolubly bound to the movement of history. Should he succeed, he would destroy himself, like the class that must destroy all classes. Nothing short of annihilating the spectacle, of which he is an undeniable part, would sufficiently

---

<sup>63</sup> Kraus, *Last Days of Mankind*, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 440/ *GS*2.1: 345.

<sup>65</sup> T.W. Adorno, "Schema of Mass Culture," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 61-97, 82; "Das Schema der Massenkultur," in *GS*3, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 299-335, 320.

<sup>66</sup> Charlie Brooker, "How to Watch Television," in *The Art Show* (2003), Channel 4.

avoid the reformist blackmail that, under the banner of *Progress*, marches onward to the tune of the *Ninth Symphony*. Before the mangled limbs, the tattered and decapitated machinery, before the skeletons and wires piling skyward as the debris of history, the past is not fulfilled (*erfüllt*). The dead remain irredeemable, lost for good, so long as the oldest patriarchal knowledge continues to reign unchallenged, continues to threaten and successfully discipline every child into conformity, regardless of the increasingly cartoonish, he-man methods. And so the anachronism of the triumphant first bars to the choral theme, the soundtrack of dead labor, falls on deaf ears. Tonight we "feel like having dinner,"<sup>67</sup> shepherd's pie and chocolate milk, alongside images that fluctuate between cadavers and luminaries bedecked in the finest livery. Who is dead and who is living? With scarcely any answer emerging, a solitary specter enters onto the one-dimensional scene. This is his assigned hour. Can there be spectators here? Can there be a chorus? Plodding through the prairie countryside, he is neither Caspar David Friedrich's recluse, nor Kierkegaard's aesthete, neither a *flâneur*, a man of letters, nor a sublime master of the theater. He knows that profundity is more than a joke at this hour. A trivial jester like the rest of the talking heads, then? Perhaps. No matter—he is the critic of the present, the age of television, and as he advances, subtly smirking and sneering, sounding the only condemnation worth making, a piano trio suddenly stands out from the clamor, hovering, trembling, *largo* to the manic pace, as gentle as the silence that all art once sought.

---

<sup>67</sup> Kraus, "Promotional Trips to Hell," 92.

## 2. Neither Demon Nor Monster (*Unmensch*)

Oh, how it snowed.

—Brooker, *The Guardian*.

If the appellation “critic of the age” holds for Kraus, despite, as Benjamin noted, the considerable dearth of sociological knowledge in his form of presentation,<sup>68</sup> something similar might be said of Brooker, who seldom if ever references the social and political preconditions of the appearances. The destructive force with which each attempts to wrench the contents of his age from their context and, in so doing, rescue them from the law-positing (*rechtsetzend*) and law-preserving (*rechtserhaltend*) violence of history,<sup>69</sup> engenders the right intuition. Nowhere is this untimely method of citation, this ruthless criticism of myth, more evident than in Brooker’s intuitive grasp of the manner in which commodity fetishism continues to dominate every aspect of life. Brooker senses, for instance, that capital is, in reality, the active agent, in contrast to the people, who are today more obviously appendages of machinery, objects of the alienated social form, than ever. Throughout his narration of the historical development of television, he gives voice to this essential phenomenon of mass society by using a refrain that, at first sight, appears to be a sort of tongue-in-cheek exaggeration, but, in truth, turns out to be a deadly serious recapitulation of a Krausian theme. From its newsreel origin to

the easy-access laptops and smartphones of today, Brooker repeatedly quips that TV itself, not the producers or consumers, has decided to do certain things. As if it were the active agent, the one endowed with consciousness, “TV [initially] mounted a lengthy PR campaign in [honor of progress].”<sup>70</sup> When, later in its development, it looked back at the earth from the moon and thus resolved to confess the fragility of existence, “TV [then] started to wonder whether progress was such a good thing after all.”<sup>71</sup>

In a similarly hyperbolic, but no less true vein about the passivity of the reified condition, Brooker suggests in his 2012 *Wipe* that commodities never step forth into the happy realm of exchange on the basis of autonomous demands from below. Still in thrall to the “mist-enveloped regions of religion,” in which dead *things* “appear [*scheinen*] as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own,”<sup>72</sup> the products and services, not the producers or consumers, “jostle desperately to associate themselves with that wholesome Olympic glow [of celebrity athletes].”<sup>73</sup> In a diabolic inversion of the Kantian ideal, people become mere means to the reproduction of the system, while the lifeless commodities and inert screens appear (*scheinen*), with all the magic and necromancy of pre-history, to be endowed with will-power. Hence, the culture industry permits or, more accurately, requires, a certain amount of skepticism, of calculated protest, in the form of, say, apocalyptic fantasy series, sci-fi dystopian films, or anti-establishment political figures, but on the whole it cannot part

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” 447/ *GS2.1*: 353

<sup>69</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 236-252, 243; “Zur Kritik der Gewalt,” in *GS2.1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 179-203, 190.

<sup>70</sup> Brooker, “Progress,” in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol.1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 165.

<sup>73</sup> Brooker, *2012 Wipe*.

ways with the ruling logic of purposiveness. In the end, insists Brooker,

TV [still] claimed progress was a great thing, predicting a world in which we'd relax in front of screens while computerized slaves did our bidding. But now the future's arrived and those screens relax in front of us while we converse through them, lose our bleeding rags at them, and jig about like desperate jesters for their computerized approval. And the screens have left us marooned here, surrounded by magic, unable to focus on anything that doesn't light up and go beep.<sup>74</sup>

Who is serving whom, and what is serving what in this spell of blind, social reproduction, in this monologue, where spectators, mesmerized by the *Black Mirror*, “are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another”?<sup>75</sup> The answer is, of course, low-hanging fruit. Nonetheless, the full significance of Debord's spectacle economy and Adorno's culture industry becomes recognizable here.<sup>76</sup> In a certain sense, these often cited, but

<sup>74</sup> Brooker, “Progress,” in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>75</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 22.

<sup>76</sup> Very little scholarship has attempted to connect Debord's and Adorno's theoretical frameworks for understanding Twentieth Century capitalism. For an exception, see Kevin Fox Gotham and Daniel A. Krier, “From the Culture Industry to the Society of the Spectacle: Critical Theory and the Situationist International,” *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 25 (2008):155-192. While there are certainly differences between these thinkers that are important, even irreconcilable, harnessing their similarities, as the author has here attempted to do, that is, setting them to work, situating them in relation to contemporary developments in the history of domination, is arguably needed more than ever today. This is because, contrary to so much media theory and philosophy, Debord and Adorno both claim that theory must understand social antagonisms in terms of changes in the composition of capital. As this essay underscores with the notion of the “cyborg man,” so much of social theory outside of Adorno and Debord has regressed behind the dialectic,

seldom understood social categories point to nothing other than the manner in which the socially necessary illusion is completed (*achevée*) or fulfilled (*vollenden*) at a particular historical hour. This is not simply a functionalist or instrumental understanding of ideology, however.<sup>77</sup> Such a conception would obscure the degree to which, in Debord's terms, the “real unreality” of society is “both the outcome and goal of the dominant mode of production”<sup>78</sup> and thus an *expression* (*Ausdruck*) of the prevailing unfreedom, an *expression* of the obstinate (*eigensinnig*) longing to be free,<sup>79</sup> albeit in distorted or contradictory form. In keeping with Marx's criticism of Bauer about how the secularization of the political state does not emancipate humans, but rather traps them all the more by giving the appearance of freedom, of active participation, the culture industry is at once the *protest* against and the material means whereby this illusion or idealization of participation is perpetuated in the era of the

---

insofar as the contemporary form of large-scale industry has long since entered into the stage, to use Günther Anders' terms, of the “obsolescence of man.” The psychology of the subject is not, as Adorno repeatedly maintained, the problematic through which contemporary antagonisms come to the fore. Instead of consigning them to the dustbin of history, Adorno and Debord's antiquatedness, that is, the fact that they fail to keep up with fashionable jargon of the academic culture industry and its prioritization of psychological categories over objective, social relations, is actually their greatest strength. As if the “subjects” themselves had not already reversed into objects, schizophrenic agents of their function, or appendages of fully incorporated machinery. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen Bd. I: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 2002).

<sup>77</sup> For more on the critique of this limited conception of ideology, see Hans Barth, *Truth and Ideology*, trans. Frederic Lilje (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>78</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 13.

<sup>79</sup> For further consideration of this obstinate force in history, see Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, trans. Richard Langston et al. (New York: Zone Books, 2014).

permanent war economy.<sup>80</sup> When, in other words, the character mask has been completely removed, when the essence of capital has been revealed as fascism, yet the illusions of political emancipation or active agency persist, then the era of the culture industry and spectacle economy has begun. The only difference is that, as the possibility of political freedom in the midst of social tyranny becomes ever-more transparent as the lie, so that no one can believe in it without appearing pathetically old-fashioned, the appeal to so-called private life, that is, the life of Socrates' *daimon*, which always said "no" to *praxis*, and always demanded retreat from the tainted realm of public affairs, increases as compensation for what was purportedly lost.

Brooker detects all of this. He detects that *Kitsch*, or, as Kraus maintained, the solemnity with which the cravat salesman and composers of the future both make their pitch, is the highest stage in the metamorphosis of capital.<sup>81</sup> The trite, advertising leitmotifs are merely the dialectical other to total war. The blithe images are constitutive of, not accidental to, an infrastructure that has reproduced itself, since the First World

---

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*. Introduction," in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, ed. James S. Allen, et al (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 176; Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie. Einleitung," in *Werke*, vol. 1, ed. Karl Dietz (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag, 1976), 378-391, 379

<sup>81</sup> Kraus, "The World of Posters," 44. Cf. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 212; *Passagenwerk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974) 281: "Picture puzzles [*Vexierbilder*], as schemata of dreamwork [*Traumarbeit*], were long ago discovered by psychoanalysis. We, however, with a similar conviction, are less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things. We seek the totemic tree of objects within the thicket of primal history. The very last—the topmost—face on the totem pole is that of kitsch."

War, on the basis of weapons of unfathomable destruction. A cursory look at the funding mechanisms to the patriotic half-time extravaganza of the sports world and the explosive pageantry at work in every last action blockbuster, wherein heroism, family, and military still triumph, despite the fact that their social substance has been completely hollowed out, makes this dialectic of duplicity, of tragedy become farce, self-evident. At the present level of accumulation, the superstructure has become base, and the base has become superstructure. A "social relationship between people" not only seems (*scheinen*) to be mediated by images, but is in fact mediated by images.<sup>82</sup> Whether as news or propaganda, advertisements or entertainment, value is, to state it bluntly, stored up in the image-positing and image-preserving apparatus. In the same way as the state, employing immeasurable quantities of productive labor, is far from being a "night watchman"<sup>83</sup> that simply stands above or protects the realization of value, the images are not epiphenomenal, but rather motors to the process. Both drive the economy forward, both are means by which total social value is intensively and extensively extracted, and both are, therefore, subject to the downward pressure and increasing speed of advanced competition.

Paralleling what was once correctly said of imperialism, the class domination on which the current form of society is built would not be able to reproduce itself without the spectacle economy ceaselessly offering up the next round of unfulfillable promises.<sup>84</sup> Hence, the spectacle, that is, all of the

---

<sup>82</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 12.

<sup>83</sup> For more on the shortcomings in this notion of the state as "night watchman," see Kluge and Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 63.

<sup>84</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 113.

gestures, all of the mass produced, standardized language, all of the jargon of the culture industry that, on and off the screen, grants reputation and livelihood to the well-adapted personalities—in a word, all of the restless vying for approval from the big Other, is precisely capital itself in the process of metamorphosis, capital itself, in the age of monopoly concentration, springing into its perfected (*vollenden*), phantasmagoric form, into the growing “organic composition of man.”<sup>85</sup> And since its products are *objective* moments, that is, capital “accumulated to the point where it becomes image,”<sup>86</sup> and not simply the grotesque reflexes of our *subjective* fantasy, unveiling its inner logic does about as much to alter the present state of affairs as unveiling the law of gravity does to stop a house from falling about our ears.

Adorno and Horkheimer once again provide the key to understanding this development in the history of domination:

The dependence of the most powerful broadcasting company on the electrical industry, or of film on the banks, characterizes the whole sphere, the individual sectors of which are themselves economically intertwined. Everything is so tightly clustered that the concentration of spirit [*Konzentration des Geistes*] reaches a level where it overflows the demarcations between company names and technical sectors. The relentless unity of the culture industry bears witness to the emergent unity of politics.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 229/ GS4: 259-60.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>87</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 96/ GS3: 144 (translation modified).

As both the philistine and expert know, the increasing concentration of capital means an increasing homogenization of political alternatives. It is beneath criticism to contend that, under this mode of production, politics could somehow escape the profit-motive. The *need* for participation does not subside, however, with this recognition of political limitations. So long as it is objectively blocked, the *need* will, in reality, persist. Where will it go? How will it express itself? Brooker’s *Progress* tracks the misrecognized attempts at demonic, that is, “private” participation, which, in failing to acknowledge the basis of its separation from “public” life—the state as such—cannot avoid betraying the good life immanent to the oath. This is another way of saying that the instant the war machine begins its attempt to conserve that which, by all accounts, has outlived its usefulness, mass produced forms of technological interactivity must also, of necessity, be pumped into the home. Kraus, who, alongside Proust, was among the last intellectuals who could avow something of his aristocratic pedigree without becoming downright reactionary, responded to this shift by lambasting Heinrich Heine and the *feuilleton* section of the newspaper.<sup>88</sup> Their saccharine defilement of language, that is, their far-from-natural technology, designed to reach a larger, half-educated (*halbgebildet*)<sup>89</sup> audience that is incapable, on the one hand, of passing judgment and, on the other, of reading without that “prompt verifiability” of newspaper “facts,”<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> Karl Kraus, “Heine and the Consequences,” in *The Kraus Project* (New York: Picador Books, 2013).

<sup>89</sup> T.W. Adorno, “Theory of Pseudo-Culture,” trans. Deborah Cook, *Telos* 95 (Spring 1993): 15-38; “Theorie der Halbbildung,” in *GS8*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 93-121.

<sup>90</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 143-166, 147; “Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen



presaged a further regression: so-called letters to the editor, in which everyone and no one becomes an expert, in which, the restless and overworked allegedly have a voice, a say, in the events as they unfold. Who could resist this awe-inspiring semblance, this magic that, unlike the slow weave and rhythm of artisanal (*handwerklich*) narration, of counsel and wisdom transmitted with unquestioned authority, seems to bring that which is most remote into closest proximity, and seemed, even for Kracauer and Benjamin, to be the disenchanting prerequisite to revolution?<sup>91</sup>

In no time, the era of radio and television—of course, also the era of propaganda—would offer the politically disenfranchised a chance to call in via telephone to roll the dice, to control the target that was at their fingertips yet simultaneously hundreds of miles away.<sup>92</sup> They were already “on-line,” already purportedly narrowing the gap between the specialist and the public.<sup>93</sup> The real-time opinions of the blogosphere, texting in your vote for the big-name star, and likewise confusing them for the fictionalized characters they play in the big-hit series,<sup>94</sup> are all modelled on the feeling of

---

zum Werke Nikolai Lesskows,” in *GS2.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 438–465, 444.

<sup>91</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” trans. Barbara Correll and Jack Zipes, *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 67–76.

<sup>92</sup> Brooker, “Progress,” in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>93</sup> For a further look at the progressive and even potentially revolutionary characteristics of the newspaper as a technical force of production that disrupts specialization, see Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.2, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 768–782, 771–772; “Der Autor als Produzent,” in *GS 2.1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 683–701, 687–88.

<sup>94</sup> Brooker, “Knowledge,” in *How TV Ruined your Life*. Adorno had already discovered this regression in consciousness in “Schema of Mass Culture,” 64/

interactivity, of immediate participation, that the early culture industry drummed into every subject. As Brooker’s first foray into criticism, *TVGoHome*, biting demonstrates, none of this is new.<sup>95</sup> The oldest religious idealization, that of pre-history, repeats itself, especially insofar as the sanctioned intermediary (*Mittler*) changes form. Christ, the secular state, George Clooney—what does it matter?<sup>96</sup> The task of human emancipation has still not escaped the tutelage (*Unmündigkeit*) of the *theatrum mundi*.<sup>97</sup> The spectators who record unimaginable misery with camera phones, but never intervene, ultimately reverse roles with the damned. Who is the victim and who the persecutor shouting “murderer”? In forgetting that they, the “nameless informers,”<sup>98</sup> are also participants in the crime, the persecutor becomes virtually indistinguishable from the tortured prisoner with amnesia. Each hiding and each

---

*GS3*: 302: “Radio broadcasts for children which intentionally play off image and reality against one another for the sake of advertising commodities and in the next moment have a Wild West hero proclaiming the virtues of some breakfast cereal, betraying the domination of image over programme in the process, are as characteristic as the identification of film stars with their roles which is promoted by the advertising media.”

<sup>95</sup> For an archive of this parody of the British magazine “Radio Times,” see Charlie Brooker, *TVGoHome*, <http://www.tvgohome.com/>

<sup>96</sup> Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 218–219.

<sup>97</sup> This perpetuation of tutelage, that is, of a self-incurred minority (*Unmündigkeit*) that, in truth, has no world (*mundus*) of its own, ought to be contrasted with Brecht’s Epic Theater, which first and foremost attempted to destroy the Shakespearean notion that “all the world’s a stage.” See Bertolt Brecht, “The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992). The impossibility of achieving this task from within the pre-established coordinates of the spectacle economy frames the discussion below concerning the inhuman (*unmenschlich*) possibilities of the present.

<sup>98</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Karl Kraus (Fragment),” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.1, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 194; “Karl Kraus (Fragment),” in *GS2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 624–25.

scream brings the hopeless “one sixtieth of a minute closer to coffin o’clock.”<sup>99</sup> Yes, the images occasionally fail to pixelate properly, or a glitch in the flow<sup>100</sup> occasionally shocks one to remembrance of that ever-present, high-pitched ring from which all determinations of sound, all order, emerge. But the time of mythical punishment, the violence against the innocent that echoes like a concussion, like the music of François Bayle, until the glass finally cracks, has too much momentum: the “transmitter” will continue its broadcast. The memory flashes of the stuffed animal, the *White Bear*, represent not the fairytale snuggle and warmth of childhood, but rather the cold practicality of survival in false society.

When, along these lines, the relatively tame and professional news-hour, as well as the harmless fun of chasing a deliberately superficial prize, slowly but surely passed over into the glitz and glamor of multi-million dollar studio sets, something novel seemed to be stirring. As though the light play of superstitious folklore was giving way to the bellicose militarism of Prokofiev’s “Dance of the Knights,” the cat was finally out of the bag.<sup>101</sup> In Brooker’s words, the “cold, steal menace of raw money”<sup>102</sup> stopped disguising its brutality, and the last remnant of bourgeois tact, the truth-moment (*Wahrheitsmoment*) of the private realm, began to wane.<sup>103</sup> “[M]en [were] reduced to walk-on parts in a monster

documentary-film,” *dead set* on self-preservation.<sup>104</sup> The creaturely (*kreatürlich*) existence that divine creation (*Kreation*) was supposed to foreclose *a priori* was now unflinchingly affirmed, now deemed inevitable, without so much as an inkling that self-preservation destroys the very self it aims to protect.<sup>105</sup> Only the dead stare into the spectacle and only the dead stare back. “[T]he street outside [becomes] a continuation of the film,” and yet no one wishes to escape any more. This proves that Kraus, who was still capable of experiencing his private idiosyncrasies as maladies disturbing every nerve fiber of his being, is truly dead.<sup>106</sup> It also proves that the Socratic dream of flight, of rising above the fray of becoming, has been realized in monstrous (*unmenschlich*) fashion. The Frankfurt School once had a name for such a development. They called it the decay of experience.

It took a former cartoonist and gamer, who, like Kraus, left school without a diploma, to make this infantile game of history an optical phenomenon of the first order. Nothing is understood about these remarkably similar men until one sees that, for both of them, the need for journalistic participation, for interactivity in “video games,” including virtual reality, 3D, and even Twitter, is inversely proportional to the level of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) in society.<sup>107</sup> Can anyone doubt whether the innovations of the latest “games,” namely their “integrated

<sup>99</sup> Brooker, “Lifecycle,” in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>100</sup> For more on the concept of a “flow” that produces the appearance of seamless transitions from program to program or lived-instance to lived-instance, see Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 77-120.

<sup>101</sup> Brooker, “Aspiration,” in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 35-37: *GS4*: 38-41

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 55/ *GS4*: 305; Charlie Brooker, *Dead Set* (UK: Zeppotron, 2008).

<sup>105</sup> In another instance of Brooker being uncannily close to both Kraus and Benjamin, the host from *Fifteen Million Merits* tries to mitigate the obscenity of the spectacle by saying that he knows that people must think he is “some sort of creature.”

<sup>106</sup> Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” 438/ *GS2.1*: 341-342.

<sup>107</sup> Charlie Brooker, et al. *How Video Games Changed the World* (UK: Zeppotron, 2013), Channel 4.

‘social’ networking features,” will fan the flames of democracy?<sup>108</sup> Only a crank, a malcontent like Stewart Lee, himself embodying contradictions of the Brookerian variety, could assert that Twitter is the *Stasi* of the Angry Birds generation.<sup>109</sup> Gil Scott-Heron was wrong, roars a throng of abused addicts, more likely descendants, as Brooker says, of moths than apes.

Be that as it may, Brooker brings into sharp relief the essence of this obstinate need that, *ceteris paribus*, can never be realized. Both electoral politics and the entertainment industry are, in the last analysis, idealizations of a material condition that, time and again, fails to achieve real communism, that secretly wants the privileges of private property, of the Roman census, to be abolished, but, in the same breath, maintains precisely those privileges.<sup>110</sup> What, then, is to be expected, so long as the essential features of this condition remain unchanged? Similarly, what should one assume about the future, if the technical agent of repression, the superego, turns out to be nothing but an all-boys club that, like management, spies for the authorities, or dies the second it wishes to silence the “voices” of adaptation? Debord again points to the unsettling answer, the only other option for Jennifer, the “attractive outsider” from *White Christmas*:

An earlier stage in the economy’s domination of social life entailed an obvious downgrading of *being* into *having* that

left its stamp on all human endeavor. The present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from *having* to appearing: all effective “having” must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d’être* from appearances.<sup>111</sup>

Although “being” and “life” should never, as Adorno taught, be hypostatized and thus, following the right of first occupancy, posited as an uncorrupted, pure immediacy, there is no denying the force behind Debord’s claim.<sup>112</sup> All that can now be expected is the PR-ification of every struggle for justice. Take down that confederate flag! Tear down that statue of the old, racist statesman! cry the powerless and those who would maintain the façade of representing them. At least the spectacle will adjust to this demand for transformation while material reality remains unaltered. At least it, and a moralistic discourse that checks the possibility of solidarity, will give the

---

<sup>111</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 16.

<sup>112</sup> This hypostatization of “life” that I am here associating with certain aspects of Debord’s thinking, in contrast to Adorno’s, might also account for some of the less critical aspects of the more recent *Black Mirror* episodes. In, for example, *Nosedive*, the formal presentation itself gives the impression that an uncorrupted form of “life” can be rigidly divided from a corrupted form of “life” that has been infected by the omnipresent social credit system. Unlike in previous series, where mediation is thought to the extreme, so that the breakout attempt or “remainder” moment takes place negatively, that is, off of the screen, here a positive alternative is offered up. The cynical subject who is never cynical enough, to use Slavoj Žižek’s formulation, is granted a subtle, and for that reason all the more insidious, form of consolation. The spectator can rest easy knowing that she is not one of the inauthentic ones. Resisting this undialectical conception of the relation between myth and enlightenment, the early Brooker denied this morsel to the famished subjects of late modernity. This undialectical feature could well account for the newly acquired popularity of *Black Mirror*. It is not for nothing that Brooker did not write the teleplay to this episode. Cf. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989).

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Brian Logan, “Sarah Millican defends Page 3 – and Stewart Lee goes for Charlie Brooker,” last modified December 11, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/dec/11/sarah-millican-stewart-lee-charlie-brooker>

<sup>110</sup> Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 219.

appearance of change, after all is lost, after all “having” and “being” have been reduced to crumbs. Not unrelated to this show of impotence are the increasing number of reports that chronicle the reporting itself, not the event, or the vox pox on the latest vox pox, on what people are saying about what is happening, instead of what is happening. Enter Brooker, master of televisual marionettes. “It’s important not just that justice is done,” claims his dime-a-dozen MP, “it’s important that justice is *seen* to be done, and if it can be seen to be done entertainingly, with its own theme music, then so much the better.”<sup>113</sup> At this juncture, the culture industry of political presentation is “languishing in a stale funk, a bit like a soap in its eighty-sixth year.”<sup>114</sup> Those who would appear different amidst actual stasis, must, therefore, replace the *noblesse oblige* air of elderly potentates. From Blair and Cameron to Obama and Paul Ryan, “younger, grinnier, more relaxed models” become the rule.<sup>115</sup> Winners of marketing campaigns, the new politicians resemble “bland, air freshener salesman, or *nice neighbors* from a shit soap-opera,” dumb and clever enough to profess the creed of the *Waldo Moment*. That this process, aptly designated the “President of America Contest” by Brooker’s correspondent, is still, on some level, taken seriously, speaks volumes.<sup>116</sup> A chorus of affected laments about the dearth of viable options is followed by uncompromising support for the “lesser evil” candidate who is, let there be no doubt, the only buffer between us and out-and-out totalitarianism. The SPD’s strategy of compromise with Hindenburg during the Weimar

Republic has apparently gone down the memory hole.<sup>117</sup> “The bourgeois [*Bürger*],” write Adorno and Horkheimer, possessing Brooker from beyond the grave,

whose lives are split between business and private life, their private life between ostentation and intimacy, their intimacy between the sullen community of marriage and the bitter solace of being entirely alone, at odds with themselves and with everyone, *are virtually already Nazis*, who are at once enthusiastic and fed up, or the city dwellers of today, who can imagine friendship only as “social contact” between the inwardly unconnected.<sup>118</sup>

Substitute “social contact” with “social networking” and one has the entire picture of the present *séparation*. The social condition under which the “relapse” into barbarism occurs has not changed in the least.<sup>119</sup> The bourgeois of today is the same unconsciously fed up bourgeois from before. Where does that leave us? Brooker, the last standing Timon, who, following Kraus, accuses the legal system itself, the court of public opinion, of injustice, has no choice. He must attempt to break the spell of the *daimon*. Can he succeed? Is that still possible? After all, it is only the monster (*Unmensch*) that, as Benjamin suggests, can conquer this *daimon*, this bourgeois split from the life of the species.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, even for Kraus, who, until a

---

<sup>117</sup> Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933-1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31.

<sup>118</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 125/ GS3: 178-179 (translation modified; my emphasis).

<sup>119</sup> T.W. Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz,” in *Can One Live after Auschwitz*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 19-33; “Erziehung nach Auschwitz,” in GS10.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.m.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972), 674-90.

<sup>120</sup> Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” 450/ GS2.1: 358.

---

<sup>113</sup> Brooker, “Progress,” in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>114</sup> Brooker, *2013 Wipe*.

<sup>115</sup> Brooker, “The Lifecycle,” in *How TV Ruined your Life*.

<sup>116</sup> Brooker, *2015 Wipe*.

late moment, supported Engelbert Dollfuss, the inhuman or sublime moment of destruction that would terrify the Nazi or, for us, the post-Nazi Nazi, requires the communist threat. Resonating with Engels's rage, Kraus, therefore, eventually came out of himself, out of his bourgeois comfort and, with all the "fire-eating, sword-swallowing scrutiny"<sup>121</sup> that he could muster, demanded that the "owners of property and blood [...] go to bed with a [communist] nightmare," if only to squelch "their appetite for preaching morality to their victims."<sup>122</sup> Brooker, on the other hand, is hardly in such a position, even if he should desire, with Kraus, that destructive justice finally defeat the dilettante luxuriating in creative (*kreativ*) preservation. The cannibal, who gained entrance into society in the figure of the satirist, may, in other words, have seen his last day, or may not, as Adorno once put it, be able to find "a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which [he] might hook a fingernail."<sup>123</sup> Has not the vampire, dead labor, sucked out all the blood with which the satirist's mimesis and cruelty are nourished? Was this not the basis of Kraus' long silence before the Nazi *Anschluss*, and his eventual suppression of his own satirical work about their rise, the *Dritte Walpurgisnacht*?<sup>124</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> Benjamin, "Karl Kraus (Fragment)," 194/ *GS2*: 624-25

<sup>122</sup> Cited from Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 456/ *GS2*: 366.

<sup>123</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 211/ *GS4*: 239.

<sup>124</sup> As far as I know, there are only two excerpts of this text in English translation. No full translation exists. See Karl Kraus, "The Third Walpurgis Night, extracts," in *German-Jewish Dialogue*, ed. Ritchie Robertson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 257-263. See also Kraus, "Protective Custody" in *In These Great Times*, ed. Harry Zohn (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1984), 105-116. In the German version, Kraus famously begins by stating that: "Mir fällt zu Hitler nichts ein" (Hitler brings nothing to my mind).

Even so: the voiceless voice of inhumanity (*Unmenschlichkeit*) wants to speak, wants to annihilate the creaturely equivocations (*kreatürlich Zweideutigkeiten*) that, to this day, perpetuate mythical law (*Recht*).<sup>125</sup> Something of this—Brooker's ownmost antinomy—is registered in the fact that Kraus' aphorism concerning the false humanism of the bourgeoisie no longer speaks in the way that it once did. Whereas for Kraus the high ideals of Beethoven are nothing in comparison to Offenbach, or "a popular tune played on a barrel organ and memory,"<sup>126</sup> for Brooker, after the destruction of memory, a popular Christmas jingle ringing for eternity in an icy-cold hell of isolation is even more terrifying than an elitism that clings to bygone music. Can Brooker, in the name of justice, distill the truth-content, the mute surplus, then, from even the most banal and tasteless of TV programs? Can he succeed without the inhuman (*Unmensch*), when the offspring of child and cannibal, origin and destruction, no longer shock, no longer come together for the sake of the hopeless ones?<sup>127</sup> Look whose hour it is now: the Vietcong and Waffen-SS are squaring off in a program called "Deadliest Warrior." Data compilation, the apogee of the fetish, aids the dramatization. The audience waits to see who will have the edge on the basis of neutral, scientific knowledge. The dead facts of the past, no longer bearing on the present, no longer weighing down or pressing in on the subject of history, are so casually presented that one begins cheering on the SS simulation, a bit like the cheering that takes place in the sports arena from which the sadism of the authoritarian personality is trained.<sup>128</sup> It's going

---

<sup>125</sup> Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 456/ *GS2*: 367

<sup>126</sup> Karl Kraus, *Dicta and Contradicta*, trans. Jonathan McVity (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 65.

<sup>127</sup> Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," 457/ *GS2.1*: 367.

<sup>128</sup> Adorno, "Education after Auschwitz," 25/ *GS10.2*: 681.

to be a close call. The spectators are on the edge of their seats. Finally, the chase is over. The SS soldier has defeated his fearsome adversary, engulfing him in flames from a flame-thrower. “Yaay! The Nazis won!” exclaims Brooker, “Hurray for the Nazis! Hurray! Hurray for the Nazis everyone. Hurray! Hurray for the Nazis, yaaaaay!” This is our tribute, our rhyme to the vanquished. It cannot be otherwise. Unless the rebellion of technology, the sleeping giant, has begun. Unless fascism, “which demands repayment in ‘human material’ for the natural material society has denied it,” has truly been defeated, that is, in more than the paltry realm of appearances.<sup>129</sup>

“Take radio,” continues the cyborg man, pacing back and forth in front of a massive computer, employing the only cadence that hits the mark, “we created *r-a-dio*—and nation spoke onto nation.” “The German radio has just announced,” interjects a crackling, auratic voice from a 1945, British broadcast, “that Hitler is dead.”

His response, after a momentary interlude of cheers: “For a bit.”

This is Brooker at his best. For this is storytelling sublated, transformed in perhaps the only way that remains for a generation of epigones schooled in the halls of television. Here, unlike the lighting flashes of “information” that are always “shot through [*durchsetzt*] with explanations” for the instant gratification of exhausted workers,<sup>130</sup> Brooker’s lesson is ambiguous, at once similar and different from Herodotus’ tale about Psammenitus’ capture.<sup>131</sup> Was it *for a bit* that nation

spoke onto nation, that technology was used for peace, instead of Saturday night distraction festivals or breakfast shows enjoyed by no one? Perhaps it was *for* a bit, that is, a binary digit that serves the production of more binary digits, more “tiny cells in tiny screens and bigger cells in bigger screens”? Maybe it was all *for* the purpose of a bit role, a bit part, to be performed for and by the spectacle, the sovereign, which is always in need of more actors, however insignificant the transitory heroes of this two-bit legend? This would make it a momentary blip in the story of catastrophe, intermittently reprised *for* a new cast and cutting-edge special effects, but certainly not the premier demand (*Forderung*) placed upon all education after (*nach*) the end of the world. So be it. There’s no other way to hear it. Nothing else survives. Nothing else lives beyond the screen, beyond the grave. Or does it? We wait for an answer, just as we wait for what comes next from Charlie Brooker, the artist and critic who assumes the mantle of Karl Kraus’ judgment.

<sup>129</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 270/ *GS1*: 507-08.

<sup>130</sup> Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 147/ *GS2.2*: 444-445.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 148/ *GS2.2*: 445.