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### Weird Mediation

*Deleuze and Guattari on Toxic Internet Subcultures*

Tuters, M.D.

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# Weird Mediation: Deleuze and Guattari on Toxic Internet Subcultures

*Marc Tuters* University of Amsterdam

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## Abstract

The article looks at how the Internet can be imagined as a kind of psychedelic technology—in the sense of ‘manifesting’ new realities—through the lens of different ideas associated with Deleuze and Guattari. It considers a darker strain of their ideas and their reception, initially looking back to discussions from earlier cybertheory before taking as its case study the production of ‘microfascist’ subjectivities on the notorious website 4chan—arguably the point of origin of both the ‘alt-right’ and ‘QAnon’. To unpack this case study, the article develops the idea of ‘weird mediation’ (in dialogue with Gilbert Simondon), as well as considering some ‘shamanic’ aspects from Deleuze and Guattari’s thought (in dialogue with Carlos Castenada), which together offer insights and warnings about the power of mind manifesting technologies.

**Keywords:** weird media theory, dark refrains, microfascism, milieu transduction, psychedelic phenomenology

## I. Introduction: Home of the Toxic Mind

In the mid-1990s, when the World Wide Web had just begun, the Internet was often imagined as a kind of psychedelic technology in the etymological sense of *mind manifesting*. The most famous articulation of this imaginary came from the Grateful Dead lyricist and self-described ‘Internet philosopher’ John Perry Barlow, who described the Internet as a new antinomian ‘home of Mind’, where the ‘legal concepts of property,

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expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply' (2016: n.p.). In this early 'cyber' imaginary, some of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas also featured quite prominently, with the Web's decentralized design often described as being 'rhizomatic' as well as Guattari's individual works inspiring a range of 'cybercommunity activists' (Cusset 2008: 255, 251). As the 'new media' field became established in the subsequent decade, however, leading scholars would come to look back on the perceived theoretical excesses of this earlier era of 'vapour theory' as something of an embarrassment (Manovich 2001; Lunenfeld and Lovink 2002: 8; Chun 2006; Rogers 2009). In today's context, in which everyone is always connected through their 'socials', it no longer makes sense to imagine the Internet as phenomenologically separate from 'real life' – or so the argument goes. And yet, in some of the more fringe regions of the Web, that old 'cyberseparationist' imaginary nevertheless persists, though often in a distinctly *dark* form (De Zeeuw and Tuters 2020).

Perversely, the conception of the Web as a sacred realm set apart from the profane world of everyday activities – and thus unaccountable with its rules – is today most often invoked by 'trolls' (see Phillips 2015), who commonly excuse their sociopathic behaviour with the argument that nothing that happens online is actually *real*. As such, those parts of the Internet that are fit closest to Barlow's antinomian imaginary also happen to be home to some of its worst actors – specifically 'anons' on imageboards and 'chan' sites. Imageboards are a kind of 'anything goes' website where participants engage in anonymous discussions that are characterised by their use of memes and subcultural slang. On 4chan, which is the most popular of the chan sites, discussions are maintained only for as long as participants engage with the content, otherwise they are deleted. As such, activities that take place on these sites are constrained and enabled by two design features: anonymity and ephemerality (Hagen 2018). While not determinative, these affordances can be considered as structuring the rule-space of the 'vernacular language games' specific to these sites (Peeters et al. 2021). An example of one such a rule is Poe's law, which holds that real and joking expressions of belief are impossible to distinguish in online discussion. In the last half decade or so, these sites have grown increasingly toxic, with 4chan now widely considered a leading recruitment and mobilisation venue for contemporary neofascist movements (Hagen and Tuters 2021).

Through Deleuze and Guattari's lens we can consider these fringe online spaces as 'milieus' that produce their own 'codes', and which communicate with one another by a process that they referred to as

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‘transcoding’ or ‘refrains’ (1987: 310–50), but which is more commonly referred to simply as memes. A highly abstract concept developed in collaborations with Guattari, in a 1991 interview Deleuze presented the refrain as Deleuze and Guattari’s primary contribution to philosophy (Deleuze 2006: 310). According to Deleuze and Guattari, ‘[t]he refrain fabricates time’ (1987: 349), and in so doing it affectingly produces what Elizabeth Grosz describes as ‘a minimum of liveable order [in] a situation in which chaos beckons’ (2008: 52). In his own work, Guattari described the refrain in terms of a ‘multiplicity of ways of keeping time’ that produces a variety of ‘collective existential territories’ and ‘modes of subjectivation’ (1995: 15). Such rhythmic process of ‘repetition with variation’ have been empirically observed in the way that Internet memes seem take on a life of their own in far right discussion on 4chan (Hagen and Venturini 2023). These ‘dark refrains’ can in turn function as a medium for ‘affective contagion’ (Sampson 2020: 5), emerging from below while amplified from above, as for example when Trump would retweet the QAnon conspiracy theory that had originated on 4chan (Nguyen 2020; Dickson 2020; De Zeeuw et al. 2020). While the ‘mainstreaming’ of this reactionary Internet imaginary has appeared to some as a ‘dark’ inversion of its early ‘utopian’ promise (Quandt 2018: 40), arguably there has always been darkness at the heart of the antinomian ‘cyber’ imaginary (Dibbell 1993).

Continuing with the psychedelic metaphor, we could say that what has changed over the course of cyberculture’s short history is the strength of the dosage, the depths of the experience and now, with growing subcultural influence of toxic imageboard sites like 4chan, the possibility of what we might call *acute media intoxication*. Drawing on the esoteric idioms of imageboard subculture, these dark refrains promise horrifying revelations via a *rabbit hole epistemology* that is only available to properly ‘pilled’ initiates. It has been from these weird and often terrifying subcultural depths that many of the most successful dark refrains of the current reactionary right have been born—from the alt-right to QAnon—and it is into those same depths that we will proceed with Deleuze and Guattari as our proverbial ‘trip guides’. We begin by considering the historical reception of Deleuze and of Guattari’s ideas in early ‘cybertheory’, before going on to discuss contemporary ‘dark’ and ‘weird’ offshoots of their project.

## II. Dark Accelerationism

Writing in the heyday of cybertheory, the cultural critic Richard Barbrook famously coined the term ‘Californian ideology’ to describe the ‘bizarre mish-mash’ of free market libertarianism combined with hippie esotericism that would form the cultural underpinnings of today’s hegemonic Silicon Valley system of values (Barbrook and Cameron 1996: 56). This essay would inspire an enormous amount of discussion online, particularly on the cybertheory email list ‘nettime’ (Dieter, Gauthier and Tuters 2019). In another text, originally posted to nettime, Barbrook focused on the pernicious influence of Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas on cybertheory (Barbrook 1998). In line with his early Californian ideology thesis, Barbrook argued that, in promoting an ‘uncompromising theoretical radicalism’, the ‘cult of Deleuze and Guattari’ encouraged an attitude of ‘intellectual elitism’ in which ‘digital vitalism’ substituted for genuine left-wing movement politics and solidarity (Barbrook 1998: n.p.). While he was an active participant in these early discussions about how the impact of Internet was outpacing our understanding of its effects, Barbrook tended to see Deleuze and Guattari as purveyors of what others at the time also called ‘fashionable nonsense’ (Sokal and Bricmont 1999: 4).

A decade on from these discussions, the philosopher Benjamin Noys would argue that Deleuze and Guattari, as well as some of their contemporaries in post-’68 French theory, sought to ‘identify new subjects of revolt as being those most radically within capitalism’, an intellectual project which Noys referred to as ‘accelerationism’ (2010: 5). Accelerationists, in Noys’s formulation, advocated for a kind of avant-garde revolutionary subjectivity that sought to amplify tendencies and contradictions imminent to late capitalism, in order to bring about its ultimate overcoming. In coining the concept of accelerationism, Noys’s initial objective was actually similar to Barbrook’s before him: to critique how Deleuze and Guattari’s thought ‘provid[es] a false path that absorbs and recuperates radical energies’ on the left (2010: 2). Subsequent to Noys’s initial coinage, the concept or accelerationism—like many of Deleuze and Guattari’s own concepts—would go on to have a very strange afterlife. Initially the term would be applied to describe a far-left ‘postcapitalist’ coming future of abundances, referred to only half-jokingly as ‘Fully Automated Luxury Communism’ (Srnicek and Williams 2017; Mason 2017; Bastani 2020). Surprisingly, it has been on the far right where the concept has been most fervently embraced, with

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a substantial number of these far-right accelerationists congregating on 4chan (Tuters and OILab 2020).

In considering the ‘reactionary turn in Web subcultures’ (Tuters and Hagen 2020: 2218) through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari, it is helpful to focus on an aspect of their thought concerned with ‘the dark underside of belief’ (Culp 2016). Exemplary of this dark tendency in Deleuze and Guattari studies is the figure of Nick Land—who was also discussed by Barbrook in the aforementioned text critical of Deleuze and Guattari’s influence on 1990s cybertheory. In the late 1990s, Land directed the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), a research centre at Warwick University that trained and influenced an entire generation of avant-garde cultural theorists in the conceptual language of Deleuze and Guattari—including Mark Fisher, Kodwo Eshun, Reza Negarestani, Hari Kunzru, Luciana Parisi and Matthew Fuller. The CCRU imagined the Internet in quasi-psychedelic terms as technology for manifesting new political realities, *ex nihilo*, by enacting them as if they already existed, regardless of whether or not one ‘believes’ in their veracity (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit 2004; Negarastani 2008).

Although some of his former pupils consider Land to have been possibly ‘the most important British philosopher of the last twenty years’ (Fisher 2012), after the CCRU’s dissolution his project took a much ‘darker’ path, and he is now considered a leading intellectual figure in contemporary ‘neoreactionary’ thought (Hawley 2017: 45)—an anti-democratic movement that envisions a sort of cyberpunk future society ruled over by a Trump-like CEO, with a far right agenda focused on ‘restoring lost ethnic sovereignty (Topinka 2019: n.p.). Yet as one insightful commentary on Land’s reactionary turn puts it, ‘nobody’s quite sure if he’s serious’ and ‘it’s important to understand not only that this ambiguity hangs over his work, but that Land knows it, and knows that you know it, and knows that you know that he knows it. And so on’ (Sandifer and Graham 2018: epub),

While neoreactionaries espouse far-right accelerationist politics, they often do so through the language games of sites like 4chan, according to which nothing that happens online should be taken seriously. In recent years, this dark dimension of the antinomian cyber-imaginary has been used to successfully advance far-right ideas in the guise of jokey refrains. By far, the best known example of this is Pepe the Frog, a refrain commonly used in the course of discussion on 4chan that developed into a far-right hate symbol during Donald Trump’s election, which the Trump campaign explicitly used to align itself with the far right (Posner 2016). Over the course of the first year of Trump’s

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administration, the Pepe refrain developed into the basis of an elaborate fictional religion—that imagined 4chan as a country with Pepe as its god of chaos (see Asprem 2020)—unsurprisingly, Nick Land has gone on record as interpreting the latter as a perfect illustration of CCRU’s psychedelic take on Deleuze and Guattari (Bauer and Tomažin 2017). Insulated from accountability by the rules of its vernacular language games, the kinds of refrains that emergence from these spaces can be described as a kind post-ironic mode of politics, a sort of ‘belief beyond belief’ (Tuters 2021)

The refrain that spread from the fringe of 4chan into the mainstream that best exemplify Land’s theory is undoubtedly QAnon (De Zeeuw and Gekker 2023). The well-known conspiracy theory was based on a series of posts to 4chan and related imageboards, written in a cryptic style by a supposed high-level insider, which social media influencers would then ‘decode’ for their audiences of mainstream Trump voters (Zadrozny and Collins 2018). As he had also done with Pepe refrain, Trump incorporated QAnon refrains into his own campaign messaging—in the course of a single day in July 2020, for example, he retweeted QAnon-related accounts fourteen separate times (Dickson 2020). Often, Trump was less the author of his own political messaging than he was a kind of booster for refrains that he picked up from the crowd; less the composer of propaganda than its conductor (Tuters 2021). This corresponds with Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between authoritarianism and fascism as a top-down versus bottom-up form of politics—one which is perfectly adapted to milieus like 4chan. In order to explore their intriguing concept of microfascism, we first need to understand Deleuze and Guattari’s *weird media theory*, in which subjects are the products of their material interactions with media milieus.

### III. Weird Mediation

Whereas many critical analyses tend to approach subcultures like 4chan and QAnonreactionary Internet phenomena through the lens of ideology critique, Deleuze and Guattari consider that ‘ideology is a most execrable concept obscuring all of the effectively operating social machines’ (1987: 6). Seen from the perspective of media theory, such a statement may be understood to highlight the central role of weird concept of ‘mediation’ in their project. This is particularly clear in Guattari’s writings, for whom ‘technological machines of information and communication operate at the heart of human subjectivity’, ‘add[ing]

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as much to thought as they subtract from thinking' since '[t]he forms of thought assisted by computer are mutant' (1995: 4, 36).

Through this weird lens, new media technologies appear, like psychedelic drugs, as a kind of *transformative encounter with alterity*. This homology between drugs and media developed at length by Erik Davis (2019) in his *High Weirdness*, a book that explores the emergence of psychedelic spirituality against the broader context of the radical experimentation of the 1970s counterculture—parts of which would also feed into the aforementioned Californian ideology. Akin to the 'psychedelic experience', as initially described by Aldous Huxley, Guattari's weird conception of *mediation* makes normal waking consciousness appear as though it were basically a reducing valve on a world that is everywhere animated by vital 'machinic' forces. Through Guattari's lens, the media environment appears to be weirdly teeming with all manner of what we could call pre-individual forms of agency.

While Deleuze and (especially) Guattari's weird media theory has multiple sources, one of their most important inspirations was the work of Gilbert Simondon, a philosopher of technology whose significance was largely overlooked in his own lifetime. For Simondon, '[w]hat resides in the machines is human reality, human gesture fixed and crystallized in working structures' (Simondon 2017: 18). As such, Simondon sees the individual as a secondary manifestation of a more primary operation, which he terms 'transduction'. Put simply, if highly abstractly: individuals are dynamically transduced through a dyadic relationship with their media environments, which Simondon calls 'associated technical milieus'. The dramatic consequence of Simondon's transduction theory is the existence of a collective pre-individual remainder in the media environment. In Simondon's words, 'the finally constituted individual carries with it a certain inheritance associated with its preindividual reality, one animated by all the potentials that characterize it' (1992: 306). Filtered through Deleuze and Guattari, Simondon's transduction theory informs with current themes in media theory focused on rethinking the concept of materiality in performative terms in which 'agency' is a widely distributed property of 'non-humans' as well as of 'media environments' (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012). Such distributed agentic processes are seen as much closer 'to what is actually happening in the body and the outside world [than] the confabulations of conscious narration', often associated with the Kantian subject at the core of the humanities (Hayles 2017: 28)

In developing their weird media theory, Deleuze and Guattari would conjoin Simondon's transduction theory with the psychoanalytic



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concept of desire—though it has been argued that Simondon himself seemingly exhibited little awareness about psychoanalysis (see Stiegler et al. 2012). Deleuze and Guattari’s weird media theory thus aims at excavating the infrastructures of desire, conceptualising *new media as machines for capturing and producing desire*. Their project seeks, however, to rid itself of the ideas of interiority and of lack central to psychological and psychoanalytic theory—as cited above, this includes the entire concept of ideology itself. Although many subsequent scholars have tended to emphasise the affirmative dimensions of this project, Deleuze and Guattari were also deeply concerned with *desire’s destructive capacities*, for which they developed the concept of microfascism.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari interestingly developed the idea of microfascism as the ultimate danger encountered by the prospective psychonaut setting out on a psychedelic journey of discovery. Although not usually imagined as being reactionaries, it is worth noting here that the term ‘psychonaut’ was coined by a key thinker of the radical right, Ernst Jünger, and some of the esoteric traditions that feed into psychedelic thought have strong resonances with fascism, both historical and contemporary (Kurlander 2017; Neaman 2019). In the aforementioned contemporary context of the reactionary turn in Internet culture, this concept arguably offers a novel framework for theorising how toxic subjectivities are *cultured* in the substratum of digital media, such as 4chan.

### IV. Shamanic Deleuze and Guattari

It is well known that the theme of fascism was explicit in Deleuze and Guattari’s collaborations, as famously remarked on by Foucault, who described *Anti-Oedipus* as an ‘introduction to the non-fascist life’, which dwells ‘in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior’ (Foucault in Deleuze and Guattari 2009: xiii). Although the concept of microfascism was first introduced in *Anti-Oedipus*, of interest here is how it is developed in a chapter of *Thousand Plateaus* entitled ‘1933: Micropolitics and Segmentarity’ (1987: 208–31). Towards the end of that chapter, microfascism is introduced in a context that might well be described as a kind of psychonaut’s guide for how to avoid experiencing a bad trip. In fact this also appears to be one of the very few places in Deleuze and Guattari’s entire oeuvre where they explicitly engage with the psychedelic tradition, specifically through a peculiar (mis)reading

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of Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1985).

Generally considered one of the all-time classics of 'head literature', together with its various sequels, *The Teachings of Don Juan* sold over 10 million copies. Initially, Castaneda's work was marketed as a diary of the writer's own experience, though it was later revealed to have been constructed from compilations of anthropological source material. In the book, the shaman Don Juan reveals that a psychonaut would encounter four imminent dangers: fear, clarity, power and old age. For Deleuze and Guattari, these are *dangers imminent in the milieus out of which subjectivity is transduced*.

With fear, the journey already begins with confronting a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Fear comes from attempts to hang on to 'anything available' as the ego disintegrates (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 227). For Deleuze and Guattari, overcoming fear requires overcoming the pull of hegemonic ways of thinking which reproduce inherited ideas – what they call an 'image of thought'. This advice resonates with Terence McKenna's idea of 'living psychedelically' as 'trying to live in an atmosphere of continuous unfolding of understanding', which is 'accessible only to the degree that one can decondition oneself from the history-bound cognitive systems that have carried one to this point' (McKenna cited in Lin 2018: 26). The absence of any foundation combined with *the endless possibilities of assemblages can be terror inducing*. Overcoming this fear involves accepting the dyadic relationship of one's self with the environment as well as the psychedelic mind's magical capacity to manifest new realities – in Guattari's words, 'incorporeal domains of entities we detect at the same time that we produce them, and which appear to have been always there, from the moment we engender them' (1995: 17).

The next danger encountered by the psychonaut is especially interesting since at first it appears so counterintuitive: clarity. In overcoming fear the psychonaut may feel that they have achieved clarity. In the psychedelic vernacular this is sometimes called 'groking', when you finally 'get it'. In Castaneda's words, '[t]hat clarity of mind, which is so hard to obtain, dispels fear, but also blinds. It forces the man never to doubt himself. It gives him the assurance he can do anything he pleases, for he sees clearly into everything' (Castaneda 1985: 53). The vernacular term for achieving clarity in contemporary neoreactionary Internet culture is 'taking the red pill' – which was initially coined by Curtis Yarvin, who along with Nick Land is one the leading figures of the neoreactionary movement (Moldbug 2007). As is well known,

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the phrase ‘taking the red pill’ comes from the Wachowski sisters’ film *The Matrix* (1999), in which Keanu Reeves’s character Neo is offered a choice between taking a blue and red pill: if he takes the red pill, like Alice in Wonderland he will see the truth, ‘how deep the rabbit hole goes’. While various neoreactionary movements use the phrase for recruitment, this idea of awakening from societal brainwashing also has deep roots in esoteric traditions cherished within psychedelic culture, as for example in the work of the Russian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff who considered people as somnambulistic machines, whose spiritual task was thus to become fully awake (Ouspenski 2001: 92; Davis 2015). In order to guard against this second danger, the psychonaut should always *maintain a degree of scepticism*, or as Deleuze and Guattari put it: ‘keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn’ (1987: 160).

If one manages to overcome the immanent danger of clarity, this leads to what Castenada originally referred to as ‘the strongest of all enemies’, power, which the shaman Don Juan warned had the capacity to make a person ‘cruel’ and ‘capricious’ (1985: 54). Here, in a brief discussion of the shamanic ritual of the Amazonian Yanomami culture, is the section in Deleuze and Guattari’s combined oeuvre that most directly engages with psychedelics. So long as the psychedelic experience is properly directed and ‘contingent upon drugs’, write Deleuze and Guattari, then it has the capacity to reorganise cognition in the form of a contingent form of revelation. The danger of power comes when, in the jargon of Deleuze and Guattari, a rigid arborescent system of thought replaces a fluid rhizomatic thought process, becoming tyrannical in the process. This *tyrannical arborescence* can be seen in the way that reactionary Internet cultures police the boundaries of their communities through language games that enact extreme us/them distinctions. The clearest example of this process is the anti-Semitic triple parenthesis refrain, which is used on 4chan to distinguish/mark off a nebulous ‘(((them)))’, as outsiders (cf Genosko 2017; Tuters and Hagen 2020). While this tyranny is obviously embodied in a figure like Trump, through Deleuze and Guattari’s lens his agency resembles that of the proverbial sorcerer’s apprentice who invokes dark forces beyond his control.

For Castenada, the fourth and final danger faced by the psychonaut was death, or confronting the inevitability of one’s own mortality, a danger which cannot ultimately be overcome. It is here in particular that Deleuze and Guattari engage in a sort of creative misreading of Castenada. In place of death and old age, Deleuze and Guattari refer to the fourth danger as ‘the great Disgust, the longing to kill and to die’ (1987: 227). This framing then provides an opening to reintroduce the

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concept of microfascism initially developed in *Anti-Oedipus*. The most well known historical application of Deleuze and Guattari's approach to fascism has been by Klaus Theweleit, in his study of the inter-war German Freikorps movement, which theorised '[t]he utopia of fascism is an edenic freedom from responsibility' (Theweleit and Ehrenreich 1987: 432). From this bottom-up perspective, fascism depends on generating a shared affect at the direct expense of the nebulous other (((them))).

In a much-cited passage from this chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari boldly state: 'Only microfascism provides an answer to the global question: Why does desire desire its own repression, how can it desire its own repression?' (1987: 215). Citing Hitler's infamous 'Nero Decree', which ordered the destruction of German infrastructure, Deleuze and Guattari identify the final danger as something akin to the Freudian death drive, or the desire to return to our primary biological condition as inanimate objects. Although Deleuze and Guattari hasten to add that they are not in fact making such association, since 'there are no internal drives in desire, only assemblages' (1987: 229), Eugene Holland has nevertheless remarked critically that this passage ultimately appears inconsistent with the stated aims of their method to do away with internal psychological explanations (2008). Moreover, Holland argues that it is not exactly clear what even constitutes a microfascist assemblage for Deleuze and Guattari. In response, I would argue that the 4chan imageboard, as discussed above, provides a concrete example for how microfascism is actually produced.

Deleuze and Guattari in fact say very little about what fascism really *is*. Instead their method prompts us to ask 'not what something means but how it works' (1987: 16). 'Fascism', according to Guattari, 'like desire, is scattered everywhere, in separate bits and pieces, within the whole social realm; it crystallizes in one place or another, depending on the relationships of force' (Guattari and Dosse 2008: 171). In order to understand it, we need to attend to the materiality and affordances of the media milieus within which it reliably crystallises—such as 4chan. By focusing on how affects produce subjectivities through studying the performative language use in subculture milieus like 4chan, Deleuze and Guattari's weird media theory offer a means by which to do so. It is, however, important to acknowledge that fascism will not 'do us the favor of returning in such a way that we can recognize easily' (Pierre-André Taguieff cited in Bratich 2022), and that conventional categories and concepts may be inadequate in light of the ever-shifting contexts

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that define these very milieus—as in the case of 4chan’s affordances of anonymity and of ephemerality.

In the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari’s own self-described ‘monstrous misreadings’ of the philosophers upon whom they based their project (1987: x), I offer a slight misreading of Deleuze and Guattari’s own slight misreading of Castenada. I propose that the force of desire that underlies fascist subjectivity is disgust—in a sense, *fascism is the multiplication of disgust*. This is an emotion familiar to all of us but which leads to a fascism when it is captured, redirected and exponentially amplified—as for example by a politician like Trump. Underpinning the QAnon narratives is the disturbing fantasy of the world’s elite as secret paedophiles, a dark refrain which Trump then captured and redirected as the basis of a quasi-fascist political movement. This reflects Deleuze and Guattari’s description of fascism as a decentralised bottom-up phenomenon: ‘a cancerous body rather than a totalitarian organism’ (1987: 215). If indeed fascism ‘finds its energy right at the heart of everyone’s desire’ (Guattari and Dosse 2008: 171), then what is required to disarm it is a recognition of our capacity to perceive others with disgust. To put it plainly, fascism seems to begin in disgust towards the other. In this (mis)reading, Deleuze and Guattari advise the judicious psychonaut to mitigate a reactionary retrenchment into disgust by opening themselves to the weird pre-individual milieu, out of which all subjectivities are collectively transduced.

## V. Conclusion: Theory Must Be Useful

A theory is exactly like a box of tools. It has nothing to do with the signifier. It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself.

Deleuze in conversation with Foucault, 1972

In spite of the charge of intellectual imposture—that they misuse metaphors from the exact sciences (Sokal and Bricmont 1999)—Deleuze and Guattari’s thought offers a toolkit for grappling with some of the complexity of the current information environment. Indeed, their philosophy explicitly sought to create a socio-political model up to date with of the latest scientific ideas on society, such as non-linear chaotic systems theory (Holland 2013: 20). The usefulness of their ideas is also part of the reason that their project has been open to a quite wide variety of implementations, some of which may also be objectionable. For anecdotal evidence of this we might consider an essay written on Deleuze and Guattari’s thought by the future CEO of BuzzFeed Jonah Peretti,

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as a media studies student in the mid-1990s, in which he expresses his desire to ‘syncopate, the accelerating rhythm of late capitalism’ (Peretti 1996). About two decades later BuzzFeed’s innovation of the clickbait format of journalism is considered by many to have been a key factor in the mainstreaming alt-right propaganda and conspiracy theory (Marantz 2019: 84–91). In the words of the Israeli Defense Forces general who used *A Thousand Plateaus* as a training manual in the development of new counter-insurgency tactics in the occupied Palestinian territories, Deleuze and Guattari offer a ‘methodology that wants to disrupt and subvert’, but which is ‘not married to its socialist ideals’ (Weizman 2006: 70).

It may be that the pragmatic tendency of theorist like Deleuze and Foucault to view their work as a ‘conceptual tool kit’ has left them open to recuperation by all kinds of other projects, most disturbingly by the ‘alt-right’ (Di Leo 2023). But while Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas may be used to all sorts of ends, they can also be usefully applied to analyse complex cultural dynamics in the contemporary social media ecosystem—specifically the processes by which reactionary subcultural narratives grew and spread from 4chan into the mainstream—while the shamanic Deleuze and Guattari provide a normative framework for how to understand as well as how to avoid these dangerous milieus. As Erik Davis optimistically concludes in his exploration of the intersections between psychedelia and media theory: ‘Today we must penetrate, navigate, and play the game of reality as never before, even as it plays us to the hilt’ (2019: 407). We are in this sense, so many of us, engaged in psychedelic self-experimentation through our ubiquitous entanglements with weird mediations and it is helpful to be aware of those who have gone before us, in order to proceed with the requisite caution—including in how we make use of the mind manifesting ideas of Deleuze and of Guattari.

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