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The Malleable Man: Psychopolitics and the Instructional Mode

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THE MALLEABLE MAN

Psychopolitics and the Instructional Mode



Thesis submitted to Leiden University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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RENTON: Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family, choose a fucking big television, choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose a three piece suite on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing sprit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked-up brats you have spawned to replace yourself.

Choose your future. Choose life. But why would I want to do a thing like that?

- Trainspotting, dir. Danny Boyle.

With the moviegoer, the self as the mainspring of thoughts and decisions relinquishes its power of control. [...] Films, then, tend to weaken the spectator's consciousness. Its withdrawal from the scene may be furthered by the darkness in moviehouses. Darkness automatically reduces our contacts with actuality, depriving us of many environmental data needed for adequate judgments and other mental activities. It lulls the mind. This explains why, from the 'twenties to the present day, the devotees of film and its opponents alike have compared the medium to a sort of drug and have drawn attention to its stupefying effects.

- Siegfried Kracauer, Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, p. 159.

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INTRODUCTION

V. S. Naipaul's classic postcolonial novel *A Bend in the River* (1979) opens with a characteristic line: 'The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it' (Naipaul 3). Poignantly, Naipaul catches an attitude of entrepreneurial spirit and competition that has taken hold of our contemporary society, propagated by the mindset of Neoliberalism. Comparable to the title of Mark Fisher's book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, it seems the natural way of things and has been installed in the everyday activities of the working classes: a need to improve and to keep on acquiring new skills in order to increase someone's job attractiveness towards an employer. If a certain person doesn't play along, others will, and they will subsequently take the former's place. Happiness, so dictates the Neoliberal narrative, is to be achieved through your own making, and therefore we ourselves are responsible for its achievement or failure.¹ In a way, we have therefore all become entrepreneurs of our own self-being.

Being so-called entrepreneurs of the Self has brought forth new attitudes, in which we adopt a more objectified technological view that makes it seem as if we should be able to fix ourself. For this goal, the individual reaches for media with a certain objective desire and reason, so that phenomenological theories about spectatorship no longer fully suffice. Therefore, this thesis will focus on Neoliberal media consumption, with instruction videos as its outspoken representative, and try to form a more accurate, dualistic theory of modern spectatorship.

Notions about Self-sense stem from Self-positioning within modern society. Since postmodernism, following Jean-François Lyotard's famous standpoint, the belief in political Grand Narratives has declined. Existentially lost without these notions of purpose, the individual instead wanders around freely. But this given freedom is scary in its openness... Søren Kierkegaard termed this phenomenon "angst:"² it denotes a radical understanding of freedom, not constrained by animalistic instinct or human morality, and it recognizes responsibilities in the range of possible choices one can make, playing into our affects. Lyotard makes a sound argument for the inference of postmodernist life in the last quarter of the twentieth century, but he bypasses the human psychological desire for guidance. To emphasize the effects of this human need, we should turn a little further. Building on Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of "bad faith" from his main work *Being and Nothingness* (orig.

¹ Throughout this thesis, with the exception of literal citations, I will write Neoliberalism with a capital N, so as to underline its role as a (New) Grand Narrative.

² In English versions of Kierkegaard's work, the original Danish word *angest* is sometimes translated as "anxiety," instead of the slightly more correct term "angst."

mauvaise foi, 70-71) shows how individuals choose to act inauthentically: they deny their radical freedom and convince themselves that there is no other way of living than through following a certain systemic approach. Dominated by angst of no longer being kept secure by the Lyotardian Grand Narratives of religious doctrine or feudalism, the individual denies free will and direct agency until validated by an imagined new authority. A new form of empowering authority are the currently popular motivational speakers and self-help gurus, such as Tony Robbins, and also the trend of mindfulness. But these new, projected, surrogate authorities might carry more of an agenda than we would initially realize. They seem to be advocates of subjective agency, but are emblematic of our wish to feel empowered through the validation of others, giving in to the hegemonic ideal of perpetuating capitalism. By acquiring certain skills of social confidence or inner peace, the individual hopes to fit in with the ideologically prescribed demands to function in society.

Lauren Berlant made great impact with their 2011 theoretical work *Cruel Optimism*, which further explores this form of hope and the affectual workings of existential angst.³ German theorists Martin Heidegger and Reinhart Koselleck had already established how the modern individual exists in a state of constant crisis, partly due to the excessive use of the term in economic and political discourses. To deal with the awareness of constant distress, Berlant then proposes that a person attaches themselves to a certain desired 'cluster of promises' (23) in order to be able to hold on through the daily anxiety of the sense of crisis. Often these promises, to which we attribute our optimistic demeanor, are 'actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (1), but we tend to keep hopeful and optimistic, because attachments and affectual relations cause distorted optimism. Since there is no viable political alternative yet, since the "loss" of Grand Narratives – a critique on Fredric Jameson, which Berlant shares with Mark Fisher – the one thing we *can* do is to make life simply bearable, choosing to continue in cruel optimism. This idea will later be further elaborated upon in my analysis of the Neoliberal drive to keep on learning new skills.

Although Neoliberalism in its current form is propagated by no political party (Hees et al. 8), the political ideology still has hegemonically grown into the "capitalist realism," and now has grounded itself as new directive to follow. It presents itself as a new narrative, however not in the sense of Lyotard's original metanarratives, since it is not legitimated by the past and motivated by a teleological ideal. Rather, it tends to be viewed as a "perpetual present" in which there needs to be steered to simply keep up, rather than to get ahead. It seems paradoxical in its intent. Ronald E. Purser, in his study on mindfulness, gives an outline of the contradictory attachment that we form

³ In her personal life, Lauren Berlant used feminine pronouns; professionally and in written work, they preferred non-binary pronouns (Traub n.p.).

thanks to cruel optimism, which can easily be applied to Neoliberal media and which relies on much the same level of resilience. Purser states that:

Any thing [sic] that offers success in our unjust society without trying to change it is not revolutionary – it just helps people cope. However, it could also be making things worse. Instead of encouraging radical action, it says the causes of suffering are disproportionately inside us, not in the political and economic frameworks that shape how we live. (Purser 7-8)

Neoliberalism too thrives on the search for meaning and the cruelly optimistic delayed reach of pursued desire. In Neoliberal societies, the subject will always attempt to grow as a person, acquire new skills, to outgrow their shackles, but still rather playing into the ideology of the system.

Neoliberal Competition

In order to understand the way in which modern spectatorship has changed under the Neoliberal system, we need to look at how the individual subject itself is influenced by it on a daily basis, and to do so it is essential to first understand its economic principles.

A pivotal image in introducing the world to Neoliberal thought was that of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher holding up F. A. Hayek's book *The Constitution of Liberty*, emanating that 'This is what we believe!', as was her later remark that 'There is no other way.' Neoliberalism and the development of the "homo economicus" were in the West strongly propagated by economists and Nobel Prize winners Hayek and Milton Friedman, whose thoughts were then politically implemented by Thatcher and her American counterpart Ronald Reagan. Strict Neoliberal policy was later dropped by their successors, but the overall body of thought still has prevailed and lives on in the mindset of (capitalist) societies, nestled deep into the notions of duty and guilt. The fact that Neoliberalism is now so strongly believed by many to be a "logical" system of governance or at least to be a necessary obstacle to function in modern society, has lead ecologist British George Monbiot to note that 'so pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognize it as an ideology' (cited in Alexander, "Rage Against the Machine" 17).

What does it then entail? David Harvey, an outspoken critic of Neoliberalism, has provided a short and clear outlining of its workings:

Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty,

unencumbered markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (Harvey 22)

Neoliberalism strives for constant growth to assure this 'human well-being,' which is in itself no unjustifiable cause. The philosophy is based upon the idea that a State's welfare is measured by (the growth of) the Gross Domestic Product, and so progression is stimulated through the development of a competitive market. By reducing government interference and increasing privatization, competition is thought to be a stimulant for innovation and improvement, weeding out the companies that provide the worse service as an economic variant of the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest. Following this, competition is seen as the defining characteristic of human relations (cf. Alexander, "Rage Against the Machine" 17), even though the markets are not transparent. The competitive market depends upon availability of choice and relies heavily on *supply over demand*, whereas in Keynesian conjunctural stimulation economies demand is put before supply. The overproduction of supply goods (of plastic packing materials for example) is a serious cause for environmental pollution and one of the factors to which society has grown so accustomed that it is hard to change on a larger scale, even when the urgency is being recognized more and more. Another asymmetrical side of the competitive market is, that where competition is thought to encourage innovation, this will dialectically lead to a company synthesis in the Hegelian sense: eventually monopoly will be reached in any sector, which will then be powerful enough to no longer need to keep innovating to keep its dominant position. The customer has been made *dependent* on the supplier. This dependency takes away the consumer's drive for critical comparison and so the large domestic internet shops have no real competition, except for even larger (foreign) companies. Furthermore, the belief in innovative competition has led to the privatization of many sectors, which make little sense for service markets and state monopolies, which do not have competitive relations between each other.

As said before, no current democratic government actively endorses Neoliberalism, but even here in The Netherlands, many policies do carry its characteristics and believe in supporting supply over demand. Since the privatization of Dutch hospitals in 2006, many have had to close their doors, since few patients take the time to compare hospitals and simply want to be helped close by and quickly. Privatization led to less subsidies, but competition did not lead to more innovation and profit. The partial privatization of the Dutch Railways (*Nederlandse Spoorwegen*) meant little for the competition market since they already *have* a monopoly. In 2016, liberal VVD minister Stef Blok tried to fix the tightness on the housing market by not focusing on the demand and giving subsidies to tenants, but by making contracts more flexible for the landlord, in the hope that more people would start renting out spaces when there would be less risk involved, increasing the supply. This created

little more supply, but did solidify the stronghold of landlords who ask high prices and can more easily evict tenants that can't afford raises. There will always be another desperate potential tenant, since people do need to live somewhere and are willing to pay more and more, or rather desperate enough to accept exploitation (cf. Salomons and Voogt).

The competition market creates asymmetrical relationships, not just between companies, but also between individual workers. They are pitted against one another in order to be coerced into innovate or else to go down trying. 'Neoliberalism divides the world into winners and losers. It accomplishes this task through its ideological linchpin: the individualization of all social phenomena' says Purser (35), which cashes in on the Kierkegaardian angst and stimulates Sartre's notion of bad faith. The stimulant for competition becomes a drive in the individual of fear to pull the short straw and lose to a greater contender on the professional job market. The intrinsic characteristic of individualized agency should mean that the individual is able to achieve more easily, yet it also means that they feel compelled to accept possible failure as their own wrongdoing. To this, Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han adds that:

People who fail in the neoliberal achievement-society see themselves as responsible for their lot and feel shame instead of questioning society or the system. Herein lies the particular intelligence defining the neoliberal regime: no resistance to the system can emerge in the first place. [...] Now, under the neoliberal regime of auto-exploitation, people are turning their aggression *against themselves*. This auto-aggressivity means that the exploitation are not inclined to revolution so much as depression. (Han, *Psychopolitics* 6-7; original italics)

Since people have grown so dependent on the Neoliberal workings of society, the acceptance of failure has become hegemonic commonplace. Margaret Thatcher's later claim about Neoliberal policy has indeed struck and stuck with society: 'Economics are the method, the object is to change the heart and soul' (cited in Purser 27).

In the constant competition, the individual worker feels compelled to keep innovating, to therefore keep cultivating themselves and making sure that they remain an efficient component in the whole picture. The acquisition of new skills keeps us attractive on the job market and so we learn programming skills, scrum management, motivational speaking or even simply ways to become a snappier dresser. To keep a job, we keep bending to its whims. The competition market has interred a feeling logic in the individual, which makes them accept the primordial blackmail of the worker (cf. Berardi 83). 'Du mußt dein Leben ändern,' says Rilke's famous last line from "Archaischer Torso Apollos," and from this prescript the German cultural philosopher Peter Sloterdijk takes the title of his book on anthropotechnics. The transcendental wish in the modern person for self-improvement,

Sloterdijk states, has taken the Rilkean line as an imperative. Neoliberalism professes an imperative of happiness to which each carries his own responsibility, and to reach it each tries improve upon themselves. In the words of Byung-Chul Han, each becomes an entrepreneur of the self: 'As a mutant form of capitalism, neoliberalism transforms workers into *entrepreneurs*. [...] Today, everyone is an *auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise*' (Han, *Psychopolitics* 5; original italics).

This has never been easier, since changing the direction of our lives is now such a fluid process. Although already past 75 years old, Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman reached his prime in the year 2000, when he started to work on his theorization of "liquid modernity." Bauman worked with notions resembling the aforementioned concepts of perpetual crisis and cruel optimism, but formed an idea of liquidity. Long-term projects, he says, are transient and hard to imagine in a state of constant angst, and so we tend to focus more on short-term projects, purely in the hope that they will result in a brighter career. One has to be flexible (cf. Sarah Bracke) and so we easily change and adopt new strategies. One example that Bauman provides is the ease with which we encounter dating in the modern times, for example through *Tinder* or *Happn*. Does your date not meet your requirements?, then you quickly move on to the next opportunity! And just so, do you believe that you need to change something about yourself and/or learn certain skills?, you find quick ways to retrain yourself! Anything seems reachable, and anyone can change for the better. A new market has established itself, that feeds on the angst and liquidity of the modern (Neoliberal) age. The subject makes themselves into a project to acquire a stronger subjective position in the world, but at the same time a flexible one, able to quickly change and adopt new strategies.

The term "Subject," however, consists of a ambiguous duplicity of being a subjective agent, capable of self-determination, and being subjected to an ideology. Part of the ideology of Neoliberalism means to believe in the achievability of happiness, whilst playing into its narrative. This at the same time promotes the notion of agent subjectivity and staying subjected to its workings. The way in which Bauman has theorized the liquidity of love and life fits these workings like a glove. Now as "entrepreneurs of the self," the mind and the body have become a project to improve upon, in order to reach the Aristotelian "ideal state," and as a means of hope to free ourselves from the cruelties of the time.

Psychopolitics and Media Presence

Whereas Neoliberal institutes underline the possibility of self-improvement, the risk for failure is just as great and through the directive of responsibility, this is a greater threat. Neoliberalism is a New Narrative, however it has reintroduced Hegelian notions of dialectic progression. In G. W. F. Hegel's

philosophy, History takes a progressive path towards a final point of convergence: to every thesis, an antithesis will react, resulting in a synthesis, becoming the new initial point of thesis for an antithesis to react to, and so on until a final state of perpetual grounding for the outcoming synthesis is reached. In theory, things should become better over time and it is because this reasoning that disappointments and setbacks are now more intensely experienced.

For Byung-Chul Han the constant input and emphasis on opportunity are the reasons for modern depression. Instead of stemming from the focus on negativity, this feeling of loss would stem from the endless positivity and constant incentives that tell us to succeed. We can't always achieve this. The agent society successfully individualizes each person's shortcomings, which are subsequently internalized and given over to depression. The individual then exploits themselves voluntarily (cf. Han, *The Burn-Out Society* 10), and the overexposure to optimistic expectation eventually leads to disappointment and the feeling of falling short.

Often industries mean well, but our Neoliberal attitude turns to our disadvantage. A good example is Dan Savage's worldwide *It Gets Better Project*, which aimed at giving young queer people who are dealing with everyday bullying and suicidal thoughts, a boost of confidence. In their article "Queer Youth Suicides and the Psychopolitics of 'It Gets Better,'" Patrick R. Grzanka and Emily S. Mann showed that encouragement does not always serve its purpose. For the campaign, thousands of celebrities and "ordinary gay people" spoke to the camera for *YouTube* clips and conveyed to the queer youth that even though life seems hopeless, eventually "it gets better," and so: Hold on! Grzanka and Mann discovered that, regardless of the campaign's good intentions, it actually led to an increase in suicides amongst queer youths. This phenomenon they attributed to the constant feed of media, its promise of "it" getting better was starting to feel like a burden for those whose life had not yet improved, feeling that they were left out. Confronted with an empty promise and the harsh reality, the Neoliberal aspect of the campaign promoted endurance and resilience, traits that would not address the root of the problem, but rather teach how to simply cope with a system in place. Happiness then was given as a goal you *have* to achieve, again dividing people into winners and losers. For many young people this rather emphasized the problematic characteristics of their lives, instead of giving them leeway, resulting in even more suicides. Although *It Gets Better* certainly has noble intentions, its methods are rooted deeply in Neoliberal logic, causing more internalized stress and depression. Rather than simply suffering from external oppression (e.g. from bullying), the Neoliberal has brought forth a self-oppressing way of thought that works on a psychological level, rather than a physical one. In a way, our own mind has become our biggest bully.

Michel Foucault's notion of "*souci de soi*" might come to mind here,⁴ and so could "biopower" because of its emphasis on disciplining its subjects, but French philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler saw this latter term as becoming outdated. He replaced it with the idea of "psychotechnologies of the psychopower," which Byung-Chul Han and others would later simplify to "psychopolitics." This notion of psychopolitics lies closer to the imperative mindset that Neoliberalism advocates, since biopower is a *physical* compulsion that cannot reach the domain of the psychological. This comes closer to Gilles Deleuze's "Society of Control" than it does to Foucault's "Society of Discipline." Just like in the example of the *It Gets Better Campaign*, its main stimulant is coming from a ubiquitous media presence. These media tend to glorify perseverance, which raises denial for vulnerability within oneself (Bracke 59). Life in the Neoliberal Realm means enduring and bouncing back, but really it thrives on the illusion of building upon the individual's subject, or rather their Subjectivity. For this, we are not merely influenced by media, we start to actively employ it.

To Make a Man: Skills and Self-Reliance

In the 1940s, prominent *Frankfurter Schulers* Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno published their well-known study *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which they claimed that the conviction of positive progression stems from the age of Enlightenment. The hegemony of enlightenment brought forth the will to control nature through technology and the democratization of knowledge, for example through Diderot and d'Alembert's encyclopedia. These tools would then also make it possible to start engineering the personal subject, driven by scientific optimism, but 'the process of *becoming-subject* is not at all natural: it happens within social, economic and media conditions that are constantly changing,' according to Franco Berardi (127). Horkheimer and Adorno saw the rise of technological aid as inevitably leading to obedience in a totalitarian ideology. An insight that was perhaps directly linked to the events leading up to and during the Second World War, but still holds up for modern psychopolitics.

To succeed in the Neoliberal Age, people are very willing to improve upon their own subject position. In the psychopolitically driven subjects, the Aristotelian notion of the pursuit for perfection has been interred, learning new skills and becoming their "ideal self." Maurizio Lazzarato concludes

⁴ Foucault actually actively applauded the ideology of Neoliberalism, in which he saw a system of personal independence from institutionalism and the promotion of his desired ideal of *souci de soi*. This seems quite out of character for the philosopher and historian who so actively criticized the notion of docile bodies, which Neoliberalism then again promotes. Foucault's either positive or negative relation towards Neoliberalism is still highly debated, in interesting books such as Geoffroy de Lagasnerie's *Foucault Against Neoliberalism?* and the obviously titled analytic anthology *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, edited by Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent.

that ‘capitalism’s answer to the question is the constitution of a “market of life” in which people purchase the existence that suits them’ (Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines* 228). This ideal self should be able to succeed in contemporary society and to do so. Nowadays we would usually look up helpful media such as *YouTube* clips to achieve new skills. This has started an industry of media dedicated to improvement and instruction, linked to its Neoliberal hegemony. There seems to be a collective belief of “the makeable man,” but is this a viable option for those who desire it? Or would one in the clutches of modern society rather be inclined to merely become “the malleable man?”

When I consume an instruction video, I could have come to that decision for a variety of reasons: a direct need for help or mere entertainment, but it seems that I am more and more inclined to simply keep acquiring seemingly useless knowledge out of a feeling of social duty.⁵ In this thesis, I therefore want to pose a theory on *intended* spectatorship, and the dualistic phenomenology which comes into play and which is even stimulated by the Neoliberal system. The spectator is not a passive entity, but the cognitive understanding of what they are consuming clashes with the pre-conscious experience and the eventual feeling of disappointment and failure.⁶ To reach this argument, I will employ theories about Neoliberal (media) efficiency, deixis and enunciation, a-signifying semiotics, phenomenology and “Horizons of expectation.”

Since the explored idea of self-reliance fed through the acquisition of new sets of skills ties in with a construct of masculinity, in which one does not ask others for help and relies on a MacGyver-esque sense of self-sustainability, the instructional *YouTube* clips that I have chosen as case studies are all linked to the basic masculine aspect that became famous from John T. Molloy’s bestseller catchphrase: *Dress for Success*. They are all instruction videos with millions of views on how to tie a tie. The six instruction videos that will be discussed here have not been chosen for their individual quality, but are quite literally chosen at random, to reflect the interchangeability that comes with this genre. The following six are nevertheless amongst the most popular tie-tying instruction videos on *YouTube*, ranked here in ascending order of the numbers of views:⁷

⁵ I will most often refer to compact cinematic clips on *YouTube* as “videos.” Although these digital cinematrics do not have anything to do with the original analogue electro-magnetic signaled medium, the word “video” has become the common referent for short (non-fictional) films on the internet and is also the denomination most commonly used in these “instruction videos” themselves.

⁶ Again, for lack of a better term, I will refer to the conscious understanding of spectatorship that the viewing party holds in mind, unaware of the pre-conscious experience of spectatorship, as a “cognitive” attitude, to emphasize that this concerns an (ideologically tainted) conscious thought process. It is the *active* subjective, almost reflective side of the spectator, over the more subjugated, affective side that is uncontrollable. However, I want to make it very clear that this term is used independently from the field of cognitivism in film studies, which is not at all featured in this thesis.

⁷ The number of views mentioned here were measured on the 4th of February, 2022. A full, MLA correct, source citation can be found in the “Cinematic Sources” at the end of this thesis. Furthermore, it should be noted that

- “How to Tie a Tie – Half Windsor Knot – Easy Method!” (uploaded by *Reef Knots*, 4.240.826 views).
- “How to tie a tie EASY WAY (Slowly & Mirrored) Windsor knot.” (uploaded by *How to Tie a Tie*, 8.038.652 views).
- “How to Tie a Windsor Knot | Men’s Fashion.” (uploaded by *Howcast*, 30.143.001 views).
- “How to Tie a Tie | Windsor (aka Full Windsor or Double Windsor) | For Beginners.” (uploaded by *Defragmenteur*, 36.103.065 views).
- “How to tie a tie – Quick and Easy.” (uploaded by *Math Meeting*, 44.670.226 views).
- “How to Tie a Tie (Mirrored / Slowly) – Full Windsor Knot.” (uploaded by *Tiehole*, 90.790.150 views).⁸

The sheer numbers that accompany these videos indicate how often they are watched and how indispensable they are to the modern subject. The video by *Tiehole* has already been viewed over 90 million times, which roughly equals the number of inhabitants of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the 16th most populated country in the world. In other words, if the number of views would represent single viewings by single individuals, this particular video would have been seen more than 1% of the entire world population!

Ever since (almost) unlimited, democratized, individual access to the internet and since readily requestable online availability of media, informative media (both text and cinematics) can be consumed more purposefully. If we are to think about cinematics as a consumed good, rather than as a means of mere entertainment, it comes to mind to consider the motive behind the choice for engaging with these media. For instruction videos, I will categorize three categories of intentions: solutionist reasons, entertainment reasons, and a form of Neoliberal plight. These motives that bring about a certain attitude and phenomenological horizon for understanding the video (and its working on the subject’s sense of self), stay in the front of the mind of the spectator. Phenomenologically dualistic, there is a certain pre-conscious affectively-driven experience intended, yet at the same time, the spectator intends the way in which they *believe* to experience it: intending hope, expectations, convictions, etc. In this thesis I will therefore argue how Neoliberalism reinforces and promotes an attitude of striving within the spectator, and will argue how it has brought about a conscious, *cognitive* form of experience.

In the first chapter, I will argue how the Neoliberal hegemonic mindset has changed the *form*

capital letters and small letters have been applied according to the exact spelling and interpunction of the title of the videos as cited by the uploading channels.

⁸ To distinguish between these videos with such confusingly similar names (all clickbait key terms of course), I will refer to the channel names that have uploaded the video when talking about specific cases.

of spectatorship, through notions of efficiency and deictic and enunciative (self-)identification, mostly building upon the analyses of Neta Alexander. In the second chapter, I will employ these notions to elaborate upon my theory of cognitive spectatorship, mainly working with the ideas of Gabriel Marcel and Maurizio Lazzarato. Lastly, in the third chapter, I will return to the notion of Neoliberal spectatorship and its intentional attitudes and argue how then still the spectator can escape this and pursue a notion of free will, via Daniel Dennett's philosophy of mind and Quinn Armstrong's peculiar 2020 film *Survival Skills*.

I want to emphasize that the focus on researching the socio-political phenomenon in question through a lens of cinema studies and (media) philosophy is not simply because we are interested in cinematic media, but that it enables us to interpret spectator relationships towards a media screen, and thus to analyze the phenomenological role that Neoliberalism has come to play in our daily media consumption, and vice versa what role our daily media consumption for the Neoliberal.

1. THE AGE OF EFFICIENCY

In our daily routine, the modern individual is driven by a sense of efficiency, which is being promoted by the socio-cultural politics of our time and which translates to our labor and media consumption. This we must further explore. Byung-Chul Han and Lauren Berlant were not the first to indicate this psychological power of ideologies. Already at the end of the seventeenth century, John Locke professed that: 'in truth the Ideas and Images in Men's Minds are the invisible Powers that constantly govern them, and to these they all universally pay a Submission' (4). Since the introduction of the printing press and its further evolution into different types of modern media, the increased access to (mass) media has had great influence on the way in which we consume and further perceive ideas. As is currently seen with the new-found popularity of conspiracy theories, someone's world view can be very much tainted by the algorithm-based information with which they are presented. Friedrich von Schlegel already understood that the way in which a person consumes various forms of media guides their arbitrary preferences, making it their own, which can then be mistaken for a wider populist understanding, when he wrote that 'one believes one hears what one merely reads' (cited in Kittler, "Grammophone, Film, Typewriter" 39). For John Locke, to participate in a society means to close a social contract in which one gives up certain personal freedoms to ensure the legal and safe well-being of the many and thus of the self as well. In modern terms, to participate in Neoliberalism is to accept its beliefs and inherent workings. The great Scottish empiricist David Hume came to critique Locke's attitude when he indicated that there is no way *not* to close the social contract. Since most ideologies widely, even nationally adopted, Hume reasons that there is no viable way of excluding oneself from the contractual society. To escape the contractual social obligations, we would have to emigrate, become a hermit or kill ourselves... Someone is not born a Lockean "tabula rasa," but already born into an ideological pattern, and just like in the works of the late Mark Fisher, there seems to be no alternative.

The ideology of Neoliberalism thrives upon the notions of productivity and efficiency, notions that brought forth the self-deceiving "homo economicus," with the now classic works by Max Weber as some of its first critical analyses. Weber's work on the Calvinist sense of duty, a mindset which he saw as greatly contributing to the eventual establishment of capitalism, explained the social ethics tied to economic hegemony. Weber's significant work on capitalism has been carried on in the Neoliberal Age by new intellectuals such as Naomi Klein, Elizabeth Anderson and Mariana Mazzucato.

Although many thinkers have written prominently on the way in which economics and

culture have shaped the way in which we understand ourselves and our obligations, I would like to (re-)introduce a thinker who tends to be forgotten nowadays, but whose work strongly resonated with me and which will serve as the red thread throughout this thesis: the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973).

Marcel has made interesting contributions to the philosophy of technology and the existential authenticity of Man, albeit that he is often undercut by his greater contemporary thinker Martin Heidegger. Whereas Heidegger focused on the idea of the inseparability of technology that would turn *das Man* into dependent entities and might steer people towards becoming inauthentic “cyborgs,”⁹ Marcel saw that, due to modern thoughts about Being, people have *already* come to view human life as technical issue. The body and the mind experience problems that are constantly in need of troubleshooting and solutions, even without the direct implication of technology. Much like in the Cartesian view on the separated mind-body correlation that both Gilbert Ryle and Maurice Merleau-Ponty so acutely disputed, Marcel notes that an inauthentic self-alienation will not necessarily be instigated by the unawareness of our relation towards the technical (cf. Heidegger), but by viewing the Subject as an *objective*, which results directly in treating the “I” as a “He.”

The Cartesian separation may be widely accepted, but in common discourse you still keep referring to your body as “my body.” The division is thus rather contrary. At the same time, we project a sense of distance onto our bodies, underscoring the “ghost in the machine:”¹⁰ when we want to lose weight, get a haircut or even plan great modifications unto it, through plastic surgery, the body becomes an obstacle and a project piece. The lived, phenomenological experience of mind-body coherency thus differs from the understood correlation, which then enables certain technological visions of the Self. This topic became one of the central themes in Marcel’s books, such as *L’homme problématique* (1955), which was wonderfully poignantly translated into Dutch as: *Humanity, to Itself a Problem*.¹¹

⁹ In his philosophy of technology, Martin Heidegger often emphasizes on the loss of *Eigentlichkeit* if Humans and Technology were to become indivisible, resulting in both dependence *on* and unawareness *of* tool accessory. Heidegger did not know the word “cyborg,” which would be conceived only later by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in their 1960 article “Cyborgs and Space,” and would not receive great prominence and public acquaintance until Donna Haraway published her book *A Cyborg Manifesto* in 1985, but the term is now often used in modern analyses of Heidegger, since it so well encapsulates his thoughts on technical reasoning. Therefore, I have used this helpful term here for the same reason.

¹⁰ British philosopher of mind Gilbert Ryle created the thought experiment of the “Ghost in the Machine,” as a way of illustrating (and then disproving) Descartes’ dualism. For Descartes, the mind is a completely free entity, which is not only to be thought of separate from, but also restricted by the limitations of the body, which is a simple collection of chemical and anatomical principles. It is still a widely believed view to think the mind opposite the body, as if a willful Ghost is imprisoned within a cold machine, but Ryle, Merleau-Ponty and their followers denounce this, stating that it is *part of* the body. Ryle was of enormous influence on Daniel Dennett, who will feature prominently in later chapters of this thesis.

¹¹ My own translation. The Dutch edition of *L’homme problématique* is titled: *De mens zichzelf een vraagstuk* (translated by dr. E. Brongersma).

In Heideggerian terms, the social conviction of Cartesian dualism is an inauthentic act leaning on *das Gerede*. It is worth noticing that in Gabriel Marcel's theory, this inauthenticity is not merely a result of being *unaware* of (the existent) Being and Not-Being, it has become an *active strategy* to try and create a subject position *by* mechanizing and denying the Self. This takes away the mystery of existence, which would take away man's own experience of purpose. It is worthy to note that Marcel was a religious philosopher in the tradition of Søren Kierkegaard, and that personal senses of purpose and conviction take up a central role in their thought. This alienated him from other existentialists and it could be a plausible reason for his eventual journey into oblivion.

Marcel emphasizes the basic self-misunderstanding of the modern Subject, which is tied to a form of desire, desire to *be* a certain something. Impressed by scientific progression, Marcel suggests, the individual can be easily persuaded to accept this loss of personal authenticity. I suggest that not simply scientific progression has brought about this willingness, but rather it stems from ideological psychopolitics. This is a solutionist view towards the Subject, which will be further explored later on in this thesis, partly via the work of Evgeny Morozov.

The introduction of Gabriel Marcel in this thesis gives us a means to re-evaluate the self-consciousness of the subject within a certain context. His views of the subjective Self as an objective entity leads us to understand the yielding to Neoliberal oppression and works as a stepping stone to my argument on dualistic spectatorship and the cognitive consciousness within the spectator in the act of media consumption.

Marcel's philosophy finds new significance in the age of Neoliberalism, such as when looking at the forementioned efficiency. The drive for efficiency is in part simply the outcome of our angst of not living up to our requirements and fear of being replaced by a more efficient person who *is* able to live up to it. In our collective pursuit for efficiency, we have given up certain personal freedoms. As a result, many aspects that Heidegger and Marcel feared have already come true, such as the storage and transmission of information for its own sake and without a direct purpose: now, we have become very used to, even dependent on Big Data. Big Data is a direct quantification of people, giving way to controllability, veiling its workings and implication for Man's Being. It truly is "Man Objectified."

What does the drive for efficiency then mean for our media consumption? It has given greater prominence to the genre of instruction videos, which give in to the Neoliberal feeling of urgency and promise more efficient work. It pays off to analyze the spectator's reason for engaging with this genre and their viewing attitude whilst doing so.

People are neither inherently good, nor bad. Only the current economic system forces them to become more egotistical than they really are, because in the end, they still need to live.

(Ödön von Horváth, 72)¹²

Media efficiency has not only to do with the *sort* of media that people consume – clips and texts that are designed to teach us more efficient ways of conduct – but also with the fact that our angst of not being efficient enough already influences *spectatorship itself*. More media needs to be consumed in less time, in order to ensure that the chance of learning new facts or skills is higher than the time “wasted” on this medium. Keen contemporary conceptualization of the role of efficiency in modern spectatorship has been done by Neta Alexander. In her article “Speed Watching, Efficiency, and the New Temporalities of Digital Spectatorship,” she repurposes Dan Harries’ concept of the “viewer,” a compound word that combines the terms “viewer” and “user,” which enables us to not only consider the spectator position that the consumer takes, but also their newfound role of the projectionist. Let’s take a little trip into the field of media archaeology to better understand the positioning of the screen and the spectator and their relationship of agency.

In the classic cinema setting, since the Lumière Brothers’ cinematography screenings up to current-day cinemas, the spectator buys a ticket and sits down in the movie hall. In the dark, they watch a film over which they have no control whatsoever. The only person to have this “power” is the person controlling the projection device. In the analogue days of cellulose nitrate film spools, the projectionist had to watch out that they didn’t project the film too fast or too slow. Firstly, this would distort the pace of the film from how it was intended. Secondly, it could lead to damaging the reels or even ignite a fire, since it was highly flammable. On top of that, they had to make sure to stand by and switch between spools at the right moment, so that there fell no time gap between scenes and so that the spectator’s immersion would not be disturbed. In the age of digital film projection, the projector can simply press play and is dismissed of any further duties, but in the cinema setting, the roles of agency have not changed. The spectators are still not able to pause or change the pace. The point of intermission has been predetermined for them and at a sudden moment, the screen will turn to black and the lights go on. Here, the spectator has to remain a passive consumer, without any possible influence on the film that they are shown.

¹² My own translation. The original text in German reads: ‘Die Menschen sind weder gut noch böse. Allerdings werden sie durch unser heutiges wirtschaftliches System gezwungen, egoistischer zu sein, als sie es eigentlich wären, da sie doch schließlich vegetieren müssen.’

Since the introduction of home television and personal media players, one *does* have an agent position in its consumption. In non-digital tv settings, one person controls the remote and has the power to change channels, volume, etc. Although there is still one person that assumes the role of projectionist – even though this role is interchangeable to anyone who steals the remote – they are nevertheless still at the mercy of “what’s on.” *Choice is free, but limited.* The spectator is still at the mercy of either available physical media, or of what television channels are playing at that very moment. Even people making their own films or (direct loop) videos cannot consume more than what they offer themselves. Nevertheless, with the introduction of home entertainment, people are able to more or less choose programming more freely and to change channels if they don’t like the offered spectacle. Home media even start to experiment with the possibilities of pausing, rewinding and fast forwarding, skills that were exclusive to the cinema projectionist until that point.

Eventually, with the introduction of digital media, spectatorship has become utterly individualized and the privatization and individualization of the Subject are of course essential characteristics for Neoliberalism. Everyone has their private screen(s), turning the act of watching cinematic media into a mostly solitary activity, whereas before it was mostly a collective activity with more family members than screens in the house. The freedom of what to watch is no longer limited to owned physical media; instead, the desired medium lies just beneath the tip of a finger, thanks to streaming services. Now, each spectator is a direct projectionist, and thanks to digital applications they can at the same time watch multiple videos, pause, skip chapters or intros and, most innovatively, adjust the speed of what is being played. With VHS and DVD, playing a video fast forward meant that the images would speed up and sound would be disabled; with digital speed regulation, apart from the pace, nothing is changed about the *diegesis* of the film. Ever so slightly, speed and sound are accelerated, but both are still comprehensible. The true “viewer” is now born. You can now watch more in less time, earning more output against less input, the very doctrine of efficiency. This notion of efficiency comes close to what N. Katherine Hayles understands as “hyper attention,” which ‘is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom’ (187). However, Hayles’ analysis depends on an efficient media consumption out of *simultaneous multitude and divided attention*, and does not stem from the manipulation of the medium itself: her theory concerns consuming *quantitatively more* through the plurality of screens and information streams, instead of consuming *faster*. But as the Neoliberal market keeps asking more of its society in less time available, speed watching is becoming the new norm, to gain optimal output out of minimal input. As Neta Alexander puts it, speed watching is now ‘often described as a means for creating a digital *Übermensch*’ (“Speed Watching” 106; original italics).

Nevertheless, the impression that it takes less input might be rather false, because ‘while

speed watching is a technique supposedly meant to save time, it requires practice, training, and focused attention' (idem 105). Watching a 5 minute long video on 1.5x speed will only take 3.33 minutes, but the 1.66 minutes saved come with a toll of more intensive concentration and mental labor. There is a neglect for the intended pace of the film or clip and the speed-watching spectator is hardly open to the process of immersion or enchantment. In a Kittlerian twist, the spectator has to more actively concentrate to distinguish between "Noise" and "Signal." This is consumption of media without the enjoyment of consumption itself, but specific consumption out of duty, free labor for a Neoliberal system that promotes the efficient spending of free time.

In her analysis, Neta Alexander explains the drive for speed watching as an effect of the Neoliberal hegemony, that is being exploited to gain the upper hand in the competition market. This competition market influences its subjects on an almost subjective level. As Jonathan Crary, Franco Berardi and Maurizio Lazzarato have all noticed, the modern worker in the digital age is easily persuaded to give up their free time for their competitive job. Although technological innovation – such as household appliances or computerization – and principles efficiency of do save time, the saved time is now being re-invested into simply doing more work, as a means for achieving even *more* efficient productivity. The drive for efficiency is always believed to have a dialectical ending point, but its inherent logic will keep turning, since competition is intrusive in everyone's spare time. And so 'while speed watching endows the viewer with the notion of omnipotence and efficiency, it serves a neoliberal logic of productivity, prolongation of the workday, and the inability to distinguish between labor and leisure' (Alexander, "Speed Watching" 107). The act of speed watching is believed to be a true timesaving measurement, but as Alexander observes: 'instead, it is a result of the viewer's narcissistic illusion that positions him or her as a master of time, a viewer who is capable of "hacking" the system and compressing its products for his or her own needs and desires' (idem 110). There is no true "life hack" in place here, but a system that *counts* on people trying to beat it, therefore giving in more of themselves than was originally intended. Labor may still be considered an essential characteristic for the human individual, as Karl Marx originally pronounced it to be, but at the same time it seems a feature to overcome, because no one likes to work harder than they ought to.

Again, we must take a little history trip, in order to grasp an understanding of the changing role of established self-identity in the Subject and to see what effect this had on notions of efficiency and Marcellian self-objectification.

The members of the Frankfurter Schule and the Italian *Operaisti* have remarked in many of their texts that the way of looking at labor has changed, because the labor itself has changed. The rebirth of the classic Marxist concept of alienation seems even more poignant now that the labor has

become a mental activity. For the computer clerk, most output consists of data, intangible and impersonal. The loss of tangible product turns into a loss of defined self-awareness. A simple but precise definition of the alienation of labor was given by Herbert Marcuse:

The worker alienated from his product is at the same time alienated from himself. His labor itself becomes no longer his own, and the fact that it becomes the property of another bespeaks an expropriation that touches the very essence of man. (cited in Berardi 43)

In Marxist theory, labor establishes identity and therefore subjects a person into an established social hierarchy. In the early crafts age of defined labor guilds, an apprentice was taken on by a master to learn a profession, this gave them both a purpose and an identity. The specialization gave them a place in society, but rarely the craftsman would be able change professions and thus change identities. In the industrial age of Henry Ford and Frederick W. Taylor, efficient distribution was engineered to assign the worker with the best capacities to certain tasks. Within the whole production process, the factory laborer only played a very small part. This is the world that Karl Marx knew and criticized for alienating the worker from their output and reducing them to a mere cog in the machine. However, you could now say that, apart from the exploitative subjection that the workers had to endure, they still worked on a *tangible and demarcated product* and the small part that they played within its realization still required them to learn a certain skill and/or the handling of a specific machine. Even though factory laborers were more easily expandible for another worker, still a related notion of identity within the workplace would be pertained because they at least knew the workings of that particular machine, and still there was a direct causality between the performed task and the reward of wages. A (demarcated) amount of time spent on an amount of tasks would result into a certain amount of salary paid, even if the worker was exploited terribly.

Today many jobs are mostly performed behind a computer. In the nineteenth century factory, most positions were interchangeable, but still each had to understand the operation of the machine. With computers, although software differs, the operation of the hardware of the machine is the same. The labor itself has therefore become a mental act, an “abstract labor” as Franco Berardi prefers to call it. Most output is data and no tangible product is created. Worker’s rights and wealth may have improved and leisure time may have been introduced to the masses, but the alienation of labor and the stress-driven workday are still very pervasive. Mental labor is not restricted to a fixed location, like a factory machine, or relies on the production of tangible goods. Instead, mental workers are compensated for a pre-defined amount of time in service to the employer, thus it is very easy for the worker to take work home and trade in their personal free time. Taylorist capitalism tries to maximize efficiency and reduce unproductive time within the working day, but psychopolitical Neoliberalism makes the distinction between labor time and spare time *itself* less clear to us, making

us *want* to give it up, believing that it is in our own best interest. This is no imposed subjection, but coercion into subjection. As Marcel writes:

I understand by “techniques of degradation” a whole body of methods deliberately put into operation in order to attack and destroy in human persons belonging to some definite class or other their self-respect, and in order to transform them little by little into mere human waste products, conscious of themselves as such, and in the end forced to despair of themselves, not merely at an intellectual level, but in the very depths of their souls. (Marcel, *Men Against Humanity* 30)

Since the machinic operation of a computer is exactly the same for each worker, it is harder to distinguish oneself in the world of competition. You need to specialize and learn how to play the machine *better* than others. This is the only way to stand out, because for Berardi the mental laborers rely on the notion that ‘every one of them develops a specific and local ability that cannot be transmitted to those who do not share the same curricular preparation and are not familiar with the same complex cognitive contents’ (74).

And so an industry for self-education is born. This can be official educational institutions such as *NCOI*, *NHA* and *LOI* here in the Netherlands, or websites with an array of possibilities such as *Skillshare*. They encourage you to learn new languages, develop programming skills, speed reading, Scrum, Lean or Agile management styles, social tricks for increasing likability, business ethics, graphic design, photoshop and video editing, statistical analysis, etcetera ad infinitum. In a way, as the capitalist logic dictates that it is your own fault if you do not yet already possess these skills. It always seems like others *do*, they are putting in more effort to get ahead in the competition. There is a feeling of responsibility and loyalty involved and so we dedicate extra time at the office to get ahead at work, even though ‘work won’t love you back’ as Sarah Jaffe put it so poetically in her book of the same name.

A subject does these trainings with a notion of plight, thus giving up their own free time and often on their own initiative and expenses. Finding new ways to improve efficiency seems to be beneficial to the person themselves, however, it *always* denotes free labor. A good and amusing example is given by Maurizio Lazzarato:

At the supermarket, I fight with the automatic check-out that is supposed to save me time, while I do the work, for free, of a clerk usually employed part-time. If I buy a plane or train ticket online, I avoid going to the station, but I must, however reluctantly, carry out unpaid “work” that increases the productivity of the train company or airline. (*Signs and Machines* 93)

Digital labor has already brought in the possibility of taking your work home, since you are no longer confined to office ledgers or machinery. You can often finish up what you started in the office on your own home computer later. Especially since the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, working from home has become a new norm and this has made it easier to stay longer to “just finish up on something,” partly because they have saved the commuter time anyhow. This is free labor in the classical sense, since this entails the tasks which the worker does *directly* for an employer.

Indirectly, the skill courses that we take, the efficiency principles such as speed watching that we apply or even Lazzarato’s example of the automatic check-out at the supermarket, are all forms of free labor as well. These are indirect forms of free labor since we do not recognize it as performed labor, but as ways in which we think we can *save* labor. These are thought to be our *own* decisions, free investments towards our own advantage, in order to give ourselves an easier time on the real job. Just like Alexander indicated it, the consumer internalizes a feeling of mastery over time, whilst actually being driven to this belief by the ideological logic. Heidi Marie Rimke noticed a certain trend among the skill-teaching narratives and that:

According to popular self-help texts, with some determination and tenacity, everyone is or can be free. But self-helpers are not simply just “free to choose,” they are *obliged to be free*. The link between the spheres of government and the “free” individual is not just an external imposition but also an internal one. (73; original italics)

As I stated before, the modern digital worker is less able to distinguish between labor time and free time, and they don’t feel exploited as long as the work that they perform seems in the interest of their self-development as a more efficient worker. They see this re-creation of the self as a way of realizing a desired potential. The dualistic improvement of the self is the realization of the Cartesian distinction between mind and body and the eventual self-perception of the Self as an Other, which Gabriel Marcel foresaw. Driven by the belief of achievability and success, the modern worker has become an entrepreneur of the Self. Building upon this idea, Franco Berardi states that:

Enterprise and labor are less opposed in the social perception and in the cognitive workers’ consciousness, that is to say the consciousness of those performing the highest level of productive labor and valorization and who represent the general tendency of labor’s social processes. Those active in jobs with a high cognitive level, therefore those who could rarely trade their places, do not oppose their labor to the creation implied by the word enterprise: on the contrary, they tend to consider their labor, even if formally dependent, to be an enterprise where they can send the best part of their energy, independently from the economic and juridical condition in which it expresses itself. (77-78)

Willingly, we thus turn to self-help literature and media, not merely to address certain direct problems, but often to “generally learn” from them and grow as a person.

Psychologist and sociologist Heidi Marie Rimke understood early the Neoliberal implications of the emerging popularity of self-help non-fiction. Although I believe that, since Stiegler, her central reading of Michel Foucault has become somewhat irrelevant, Rimke has taken a fascinating stance against the social encouragement of self-improvement, most clearly in her article “Governing Citizens Through Self-Help Literature.” In it, she meticulously works out the urge of responsibility in an individualized society:

Self-help is an activity presumed to be voluntary and individualistic. Based upon notions such as choice, autonomy and freedom, self-help relies upon the principle of individuality and entails self-modification and “improvement.” These preoccupations with self-liberation and self-enlightenment are the social and political results of a hyper-individuality promoted by an extensive essentialist psychologization of the self in everyday life. Rather than viewing individuals and individualism as the historical product of intersecting social processes and cultural discourses, proponents of the principle of individuality, which is crucial in self-help rhetoric, assume the social world to be the sum aggregation of atomized, autonomous and self-governing individual persons. [...] Self-help techniques operate not so much by way of negative prohibition but by way of positive, productive application: the self-helper must be skilled in his or her own subjection, in organizing and sustaining some stable operative unity among the multitudinous, divergent effects of the techniques that produce intelligible selfhood. By marshalling the concept of responsibility, popular self-help discourses provide an example of how the operations of power in everyday life can incite governance of the self thanks to expert pronouncements about both success and morality. (62-63)

Since self-realization should be believed to be a reachable goal, the self-help industry has grounded itself in a communicative achievability: it is a semiotic game. The acquisition of skills is the attempt to master certain signifiers, not of an actual development of the Self, but of the semiotic workings of a Lacanian Symbolic image:

Rather than discovering their “real selves”, self-helpers create and constitute their identities by the very practices and techniques prescribed for knowing and uncovering. Thus, self-knowledge is not, as is commonly assumed, a product of truths unveiled through an in-depth probing of inner recesses of the psyche or soul. Rather, the self is a project and a product of a mastery of a discourse — a form of “knowing how” rather than 'knowing that'. In this sense, neither the self nor help is achieved. Instead, the self becomes reinvented by its dependence

on a novel system of “popular” expert truth. Self-definition is actually negated, and a paradoxically “new and improved” pathologized identity comes to life. (idem 70-71)

Focusing on the ideal selfhood that we could achieve, we actively seek and consume self-help and instructional media. Nowadays, a great part of this will be cinematic media, in the form of instructional clips on *YouTube*, *Skillshare*, etc. Taken in by the instructional tone, we form a remarkable sort of relation towards the media screens that we employ. The semiotic principle will be further explored in the chapter on enunciation, but first let’s return to the spectator’s drive and reasoning for watching instruction videos, on which we will build our argument.

Speech and Touch: The Spectator and the Screen

The manipulability of the modern person should first be sought in the relationships that they establish with their technological devices, which are their direct linking apparatuses towards the world in which they participate. Here, our analysis takes its first steps into the field of phenomenology.

With the arrival of mobile screens, most notably smartphones and tablets, I contend that the screen has become a tool in the Heideggerian sense. When the screen occupied a fixed position, a big television in a living room, it commands the viewing direction of each of the spectators. In the event that someone were to get up and change seats or fix a drink, while walking they might continue watching the program, thus turning their heads while walking and changing their angle towards the fixed spectacle. In that instance, there is an understanding of the spectacle playing within the non-diegetic world that surrounds it. Since many screens have moved to the palm of our hand, media players on which streaming platforms such as *YouTube*, *Netflix*, *Amazon Prime* and *Disney+* now dominate, have become extended integrations of ourselves. Just like the famous example of the hammer in Martin Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology*, the mobile screen as a tool in use obscures itself. Whilst hammering, the carpenter understands the tool as an extension of their arm, its technical proficiency works so well that the user more or less forgets its existence until the relationship is distorted. When the hammer breaks, suddenly the carpenter is confronted with the technical intrusion that was obscured. For Heidegger, the original essence of technology (which he bases on the Greek concept of *τέχνη*) was to open up possibilities and show the world’s potential, but modern technology deliberately obscures this relationship with the person, bringing about an inauthentic composure. Habituation can thus lead to becoming dependent on a device or tool.

The device that is carried in the hand while watching video clips engages in quite the same way. Instead of the commanding fixed position towards which everyone would turn their heads, a

mobile screen turns along with a person's line of sight. Whilst getting up for a drink, doing dishes or even going to the bathroom, we can bring our screens along without breaking visual contact or even moving the angle on our line of sight. Just like Heidegger's hammer, the mobile screen has become an extension of the arm and thus it has obscured its very essence. We experience the spectacle, but are hardly aware of the screen. By obscuring the device, the direct influence that the medium itself emits, is much harder to notice. It has become immersive.

Noting this relation that the spectator establishes towards the media device is *essential* for understanding the instructional power that these media hold over the spectator. When watching an instructional video, a spectator is inclined to adopt a docile attitude. They recognize a more knowledgeable person in the video and in order to learn, the spectator tries to be receptive, obedient to the steps that are explicated. Stanley Cavell's concept of skeptical spectatorship is halted in the immersion, thanks to the film's conveyance of a notion of reality and semiotic trust. This idea will be further explored later on, however it should already be noted that the fact that the loss of awareness of the device's presence, the Heideggerian technological obscuring, is an accelerator for this process. The experience of immediacy of the medium spectacle creates a phenomenological relation towards the instruction video that is built upon the idea of direct experience, on which I will elaborate further in the next chapter. Worth noticing is that, in line with the thought of Edmund Husserl, this is not the "natural attitude" of experience. The observer first understands his *understanding* of the world to be the objective, epistemological reality, unaware of the distortion of phenomena and only by studying the appearance of the observed can they understand the fallacy of this natural attitude; this is the great task of phenomenology according to Husserl. I will not submit instructional cinema to the extensive Husserlian process of phenomenological reduction in this thesis, but let's make clear that the universal value that instructional cinema purports to exhibit receives its strength from the observer's recognition of these visions as contributing to their understanding of a "knowable" reality.

Skill-teaching media are readily available and the instruction videos that you watch can vary from a range of topics. *YouTube* is filled with channels dedicated to home design, makeup tutorials, mechanics, body positivity, motivational speech or to whatever a modern person may be demanding in their life. Among viewers, there is a belief that watching these videos will automatically mean that its knowledge is directly being transferred onto the spectator, a direct fix for certain shortcomings. The narrator of the video even explicitly promises us so and backed by the Neoliberal logic, with which a whole generation has now been brought up. Assumably, solutions don't come from social and historical circumstances, but from individual interference and subjective agency. Just like Zygmunt Bauman described it, each problem is in the liquid age believed to have a direct solution,

but is then faced by a different problem, repeating the process each time.

The belief of short-term fixes for contemporary problems is (pejoratively) referred to as “solutionism,” a word that Evgeny Morozov takes as a central focal point in his study, which stems from the fields of architecture and urban planning (Morozov 5-6). The idea of immediate action and solution behavior installs a reliance on technological consultation. However most often this will only entail solutions for the short-term:

I do not advocate inaction or deny that many (though not all) of the problems tackled by solutionists – from climate change to obesity to declining levels of trust in the political system – are important and demand immediate action (how exactly those problems are composed is, of course, a different matter; there is more than one way to describe each). But the urgency of the problems in question does not automatically confer legitimacy upon a panoply of new, clean, and efficient technological solutions so in vogue these days. (7)

When people put their trust in these instructional videos, they will be more receptive and more obedient to its message. This is being amplified by the haptic connection that they engage in with these videos, ceaselessly translating into a cognitive awareness of the world that works twofold: On the one hand there is the haptic connection towards the device, on the other hand a suture connection towards the viewed spectacle. Before I am able to work out this hypothesis, I will first commend on the nature and the urge for watching this genre of internet clips.

The plausible motives for watching instruction videos fall, as I see it, into three major distinguishable categories: Foremost, they can (and often are) being watched for a direct solutionist reason, where a direct fix is sought relating to an identifiable problem. Secondly, they can be watched for pure entertainment reasons – these videos can truly be very addictive and chances are small that you would ever need to perform an open-heart surgery, survive for a month in the desert or needs to learn how to ski backwards, but there are easily findable instruction videos to help out in all of these situations. Thirdly, there are the instructional videos that tutor a certain skill that is no fix for a direct identifiable issue, but rather operates on a certain desire or expectation within the spectator. The spectator believes that the acquisition of this particular skill will be beneficial in their work or daily life and teach them a “life hack,” but there is no direct causal relation between an issue A and a solution B. It is this category that is so characteristic for the Neoliberal hegemony. These desires thrive upon the semiotic promises that exuberate out of the realm of possibilities that these videos open up to the desireful spectator. In search for subjective agency, the spectators are taken in by the idea of signifying semiotic power, but which keeps evading them. There is no inherently evil motive lurking behind these instruction videos that are to be found on *YouTube*, yet their workings of Neoliberal thought fascinate me enormously. They exhale Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism,” an

affectively driven will to grow, a self-deceiving hunt for the subjective position that we long, however a rather feeling of obligation to stand firm in our current times, as well.

To understand the antics of digital address we should first look more deeply into our case studies here. There is a comparable tone of narration and set-up in these instruction videos. For the tie-tying videos, it usually follow the following pattern: the spectator is greeted by either a (fully visible) well-groomed man in medium shot with a loose tie hanging over their shirt (*Howcast* and *Reef Knots*) or the video goes straight towards the zoomed-in cropped frame that shows the instructor from the chin down towards the hem of the shirt (*How to tie a tie*, *Math Meeting*, *defragmenteur* and *tiehole*). This strange torso shot is a close-up of the surface on which the solutionist act will take place. It is rather similar in its set-up for other types of instruction videos that aim at teaching you new skills as well, whether it is concerned with teaching you how to do makeup (showing a face), change a flat tire (showing the wheel), painting a picture (showing the canvas), etc. Their cameras will most often fixate on the specific surface in question, in order to give you the best view and to make the directions as clear as possible. To the solutionist spectator, the screen becomes a *mirror*, and whilst they try to duplicate the actions that are performed on the screen, they imitate every move that the instructor shows. The *cinematic* skewers now away from making the moving image a mirror of *society*, as Cesare Zavattini theorized film's essence to be, but rather a virtual ideal of reality is formed and which the *spectator* then mirrors. Whenever an ideology states certain standards, the willful spectator will try to fit in. A set standard means that there is no other way without falling outside of society, just like David Hume had argued against John Locke.

Before the tie gets tied, the instructor of the video emphasizes how "easy" the (half) Windsor knot is, how short this video will be and how quickly the process will go, and how everyone "ought" to know how to do it. This "ought" ensures the belief in Neoliberal achievability thanks to these skills, furthermore, the *duty* to be able to do so. These words all belong to a semantic field of willingness. Whereas the solutionist spectator directly mirrors the video, the entertainment spectator will not engage bodily to the medium spectacle. This shows differences in character and attitude between the different types of instructional media consumers, but then how about our third category?

As established, the suggested Neoliberal spectator has no tie that needs urgent tying. They do not face a problem with a direct solutionist but still take more concentrated notice towards the video instructor than the entertained spectator does. They purport a sort of reverence towards the instructor, trying to soak up as much knowledge as possible for personal growth, but showing without direct result. On the one hand, this professed symptom is not necessarily absurd or pointless in itself, for example learning CPR in advance to save a life later, even while hoping that you will never *have* to use it. On the other hand, watching *YouTube* has taught me how to clean the

aquariums for the tropical fish I never bought, how to cut and install acute corners on the wooden cabinets I never built and how to ask for a coffee in a country I never planned to visit; skills that I will most likely never have to put to action, and even if I ever do, will not be important skills that I should be able to demonstrate right away without any hesitation. These viewing attitudes float on the axis between (bored) entertainment and Neoliberal precaution.

Nevertheless, Neoliberal spectators are often endowed with a sense of misplaced urgency, which makes them put their trust into these videos. One of the most popular instruction videos on *YouTube*, for instance, is: how to take of a woman's bra. Let's presume that their target audience mostly consists of insecure heterosexual teenage boys, who unlike lesbian girls don't wear bras themselves. I can only hope that these boys are not watching these videos with solutionist intention, sitting on a bed with their half-naked girlfriend, struggling with the bra straps in one hand, watching every step of an instruction video on a phone in the other. These videos are intended to be watched in advance and emphasize that you want to be prepared in these situations and to be able to show confidence, so as not to make a bad impression on the annoyed girl.

But would a girl really be that turned off by this? Does a teenage boy really *have* to be *prepared* for this? Insecurity on a certain topic is what strengthens trust and obedience towards an instructor, and in the hegemonic tradition of Neoliberalism, people are inclined to become victim to Foucault's disciplinary society or even Deleuze's society of control, all for the sake of gaining personal agency. Best-selling self-help guru M. Scott Peck had a clear view on the matter and professes that 'self-disciplining is self-caring' (cited in Rimke 68). For Peck, the revered relationship that the spectator engages in with a motivational instructor only unlocks the first's own potential: 'Rather than lament one's lack of political and social impact, the [spectator] is instructed to recognize, accept and exult in her/his "immense personal power"' (idem 65). In the next subchapter, I want to introduce the second-person narrator as one of the driving forces behind cognitive phenomenological distortion, and set up a basis for the more technical elaboration of enunciation and deixis.

Being Spoken To: The Second-Person Narrator and the Cinematic

Both enunciation and deixis are notions that rely heavily on forms of narrative. In literary fiction, we are very familiar with the First and Third-Person narratives: respectively books written from the viewpoint of an "I," or stories that are being narrated by an impartial observer that merely describes a third party. Much less conventional is the Second-Person narrative, novels that are written towards a "you," although it *does* occur occasionally. A couple of example are Michel Butor's *nouveau roman*

La modification (translated into English as *Second Thoughts*), Italo Calvino's playful postmodernist novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Nobel Prize laureate Gao Xingjian's book *Soul Mountain*, N. K. Jemisin's Afrofuturist work *The Fifth Season*, or the Dutch novella *The Elements* by Harry Mulisch. All five examples are written using an innovative literary form in order to be able to include a "you" into the diegesis. One thing is rather important to underline for this storytelling narrative technique: instead of merely breaking the fourth wall and addressing the reader *as a reader*, this narrative device addresses the reader *as a character within the story*. The story tells us what "you" are doing within the diegesis and thus pushing the story further, but it is no postmodern comment on the non-diegetic activity of holding a book, reading the lines, etc. In that instance, the reader is acknowledged by the author or characters, but is no part of the story itself. This is a rather important difference to be aware of, in order to see the development of this same device in film history.

In cinema, the concept of focalized narratives works a little different. For the auditive narrator, it is conventional to employ the third-person narrative, but it is not uncommon to have a character narrate the film in the first-person, often reflecting in voice over on the events that came over them. For the visual narrator it is a bit more uncommon to have a first-person focalization throughout the movie, but certain scenes may be filmed from a point-of-view shot, for instance when focalizing from the murderer's view in horror films such as Michael Powell's 1960 classic *Peeping Tom* or the openings of John Carpenter's original 1978 version of the slasher franchise *Halloween* or Delmer Daves' 1947's film noir *Dark Passage*. This technique not only obscures the identity of the killer, but also forces the spectator to identify with them, because of the forced focalization of the point-of-view perspective.

In early cinema, a film was sometimes opened by a cast or crew member that spoke to the audience. In James Whale's 1931 classic *Frankenstein*, cast member Edward Van Sloan (who plays Frankenstein's old mentor dr. Waldman in the film) steps through the curtains of a theatre to give the audience 'a word of friendly warning' on behalf of producer Carl Laemmle Jr. Watching the film nowadays, you could hardly see the need to prepare us for anything to come, but still it is an interesting acknowledgement of the spectator by ways of enunciative positioning. This prologue is undeniably a part of the film, but is it also a part of the diegetic story? Here, the *man* Edward Van Sloan separates himself from the character of dr. Waldman to establish a relationship with the spectator. As dr. Waldman, he could not possibly break down the fourth wall, because it would break the fantastical diegesis of this *Universal Monsters* flick.

The breaking of the fourth wall and the acknowledgement of the audience *within* the story is a way to make the spectator complicit to the terrors on screen. Famous examples are the wink that the intruder Paul gives to the audience in Michael Haneke's horrifying but absolutely brilliant 1997 film *Funny Games*. It evaluates the violent torture that he and his accomplice Peter are imposing

upon the family and later asks the spectator directly what they are getting out of “enjoying” these monstrosities. This scopophilia in the spectator makes them just as hypocritical and “guilty” as the actual perpetrators, because there is no plot, there is no reason for their violence, there is only the deed for the sake of the deed. The fourth wall breaking also breaks down a Cavellian skeptic view of the film and suddenly launches the scopophilic spectator outside of the comfort of watching. What is separated in *Frankenstein* in the distinguished parts of Edward Van Sloan and Dr. Waldman, is suddenly brought together within the *fabula*. The spectator only realizes this when they have already become part of the crime.

There has often been pointed towards the (in film studies overly analyzed and chewed up) 1903 film *The Great Train Robbery* by Edwin S. Porter, in which one of the robbers points his gun directly towards the camera and shoots “at the audience,” thus suddenly not only including them in the film but directly attributing them a victim’s role. At the end of the great but overlooked 1941 Faustian tale *The Devil and Daniel Webster* by William Dieterle, where the devilish Mr. Scratch is seen checking a notebook searching for his next victim, looking up in to the camera and acknowledging the audience, smiling menacingly and pointing directly towards the spectator and mouthing the word “you.” However, the breaking of the fourth wall does not have to be creepy necessarily, the technique is also applicable in dramatic works such as Leo McCarey’s tearjerker *Make Way for Tomorrow*, or for comedic effect when Oliver Hardy’s looks into the camera in *Sons of the Desert* each time after Stan Laurel does something stupid, thus asking the spectator without words “can you believe what I have to go through here?” These are, however, all examples of a technique that pull the spectator into the film and in a way makes the spectator interact with the character on screen, but I would be hesitant to call these moments second-person narratives.

A more exact second-person track on the auditive narration can be found in public information films that were popular in the 1940s and onwards. During the Second World War they often played in theaters, in which the American government promoted certain behavior and war bond investments via infotainment clips. The genre grew on in the 1950s and 1960s with the exponential growth of homes with television sets. These forms of public information films could be about a great variety of topics, from workplace ethics to traffic awareness. And yes, famously you can now find authentic publicly broadcasted information films from this time period on *YouTube*, which warn the public about “perverted intentions” of homosexuals, the “incompetence of women in the workplace,” and other such nonsense.¹³

¹³ These real Public Information Films are *Boys Beware* (listed in the “Cinematic Sources” list of this thesis under its *YouTube* name “Boys Beware – Anti Gay Film from 1961”) and *The Trouble with Women* (listed in the “Cinematic Sources” under “1950s Education ‘Women In The Workplace’”). They make for an interesting, somewhat amusing, but uncomfortable viewing experience.

Public information films take an innovative and interesting narrative point of view: many of these focus on a character that is directly being addressed by an external narrator. Occasionally, the character would even be aligned with the theoretic spectator, opening the broadcast with a hypothetical character and the straightforward announcement: “this is you.” It sketches a certain situation in which the narrator advises and gives moral exposition. The “you” then is the illustrative character in the film, a notion that I will argue will gradually develop into the enunciative model that we know from contemporary instructional videos.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the enunciative conception of Francesco Casetti and Christian Metz, but first I will consider two exemplary yet unique films to look at the form of Second-Person Narration in classic cinema, which show both the origin for the tone that will continue into twenty-first century instruction videos and in order to gain an understanding for the (deictic) positioning of character, narrator and spectator.

Allen Baron’s 1960 film *Blast of Silence* starts with a shot of the end of a train tunnel approaching, the light in the distance slowly growing clearer and bigger. It symbolizes a birth, and with the noises from the train rails and the non-diegetic gasps of a laboring mother in the background, the raspy voice of Lionel Stander starts narrating the film: ‘Remembering, out of the black silence, you were born in pain.’ The narration is directed inwardly towards the character, but in a way also towards the spectator, and just like in the public information films, the spectator has to imagine themselves to be the character on screen: ‘You were born with hate and anger built in. Took a slap on the backside to blast out the scream and then you knew you were alive. Eight pounds, five ounces. “Baby Boy” Frankie Bono.’ The birth metaphor then also refers to the transition of the spectator imagining themselves to be the gangster *himself*, a complete re-birth of the experience of spectatorship, if you will. “Baby Boy” Frankie Bono, as he – or you – is regularly addressed in full by the narrator, takes an assignment for a hired killing and spends the film tailing his intended victim, purchasing a gun with a silencer and going to bars and parties, just killing the time until the moment that the deed has to take place. Frankie doesn’t speak much, but the narrator gives the viewers much of the psychology of the character and of his/your (projected) personality, such as Frankie’s longing for solitude. More interestingly, the narrator often warns him for situations or bad characters approaching. Does Frankie hear this? He holds still and seems to take the advice. The character on screen is subordinate to the seeming wisdom of the narration.

This narrating tone was at the time not only to be found in grizzly types of films, Disney for example produced a whole sleuth of comedic shorts with a commanding narrator, which starred Goofy as a wannabe sportsman: *How to Play Baseball*, *The Art of Skiing*, *Goofy Gymnastics*, and many others. In this genre, there is also one cartoon that fits surprisingly well as a companion piece to *Blast*

of Silence: In *Donald's Crime*, Donald Duck steals money out of the piggy bank that belongs to his nephews Huey, Dewey and Louie, so that he can take Daisy out to a dance hall. Sterling Holloway, who has the same cool, raspy intonation as Lionel Stander, provides the narration in much the same way as we hear in *Blast of Silence*. Donald brings Daisy home and she calls him a "bigshot," but then he realizes that he is just a common crook and starts to run away from his conscience and from the police that presumably follows him, until he finds a dishwashing job to earn every stolen penny back. Perhaps not as clear as its counterpart in colligating the main character with the spectator, still the second-person narrative of the auditive narrator does pose an interesting hierarchical relationship. A voice speaks, the character follows. And since his film definitely relies on a more comedic tone, Donald Duck seems to be even more directly aware of the narration and follows the instruction more precisely than "Baby Boy" Frankie Bono does.

The narrator in these two films somewhat takes the form of an omniscient narrator, however he stays in the diegetic realm of his character and does not predict or even seem to know the future, he only has a complete understanding of business *within* the present. The *present* omniscience, then, gives the narrator a hierarchical power over the character. What they say sounds knowledgeable and is therefore directly followed up by the characters, as if deterministically coerced (a concept to which I will return in the third chapter). This reliance on a voice that seems to master the present seems to be one of the great metaphors for the Neoliberal age: here is an authoritative figure that seems to fully master the presence but has no ultimate long-term plan(ning). It shows just how modern governments handle economic questions, climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. The direction of policies is steered per situation, according to direct adjustable needs that present themselves at that moment, instead of planning ahead, so as to not take away too much of the entrepreneurial freedom. It is the politicization of Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity and the interchangeability of policy. Admitted, long-term state planning was always more of a communist policy, but the dialectical approach bears witness that fear for the market has taken the place of ideological compasses.

It is also visible in the current popularity of populist politicians worldwide. Lost in the uncertainty of life, the people long for direction. As seen before, people desire subjective agency, and in political populist discourse, there is definitively a narrative of promise. Chantal Mouffe theorizes that because of the political climate of civic collaboration between different parties (the Dutch "Purple Government," which comes close to Hannah Arendt's political ideal) and policies of great compromise (*het Poldermodel*), political ideology is diminished for the sake of optimal cooperation between different groups. Mouffe states that political parties lack the identity which they once found to be the core of their objective. This hiatus is being exploited by the rise of (usually) right-wing populist parties, who all over the Western World are gaining constituency (cf. Mouffe 1;

idem 10-11).¹⁴ Populism is no ideology in itself, but a narrative of regaining an imagined lost prime, to “make America great again” or to have “The Netherlands for the Dutch again.”¹⁵ The emphasis on the word “again” marks a nostalgic wish for an age of subjective autonomy, in which a certain group is supposed to have had autonomic agency and freedom to act, which has supposedly been diminished by the intrusion of another, non-autochthonous, group. The desire for control over one’s own life seems cruelly optimistic in the counter-intuitive narrative of right-wing populism. The craving for fascism that lurks in every society, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari boldly stated in *L’Anti-Œdipe*, is a psychological cohesive that is born out of dreaded social pressure and the disapproval of internal desire. The collective achievement of agency means for the individual then to achieve a form of power, whilst having to give up certain personal freedoms in return. Populism is a game of creating a illusive narrative for certain (reactionary) needs, which the confused individual accepts as the solution for this feeling of being lost in the crowd: just like psychoanalysis is in Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis. In this new Neoliberal and (more importantly) digital age, psychopolitics is not a force that disciplines directly but encourages the individual’s choice to play along with its rules, they too follow such an illusive narrative. Each tries to adhere to the beset norms and standards, and now it has never been easier for the subject(ed) to find instructions on any particular topic and to let themselves become subjected to the addressing voice.

This cinematic origin to the instructional mode that was introduced above through *Blast of Silence* and *Donald’s Crime*, ties in heavily with the contemporary instructional *YouTube* clips that are in question in this thesis. These videos originate from and champion the idea of a step by step improvement of life, the eventual achievement of subjective agency, as I have called this desire earlier. The objective then is to gain human capital, and for an *operaista* like Maurizio Lazzarato, whose body of thought has been greatly influenced by Félix Guattari, capital in all its forms is a ‘semiotic category that affects all levels of production and all levels of the stratification of power’ (Lazzarato, “Semiotic Pluralism” n.p.). Within the controlled system of Neoliberalism, the achievement of subjective agency capital, the individual would in theory rely on the ability to produce meaning, but for Lazzarato it is evident that ‘with neoliberal deterritorialization, no new production of subjectivity takes place’ (Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines* 8). The crux of Neoliberalism, I would argue, is that *we believe that we do* constantly produce new subjectivity, driven by the illusive desire of responsibility and achievability, however, as also Lazzarato seems to understand it, this

¹⁴ The Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, whose work I greatly admire, has written fascinating philosophical argumentation on short-term governmental steered planning and the dangerous rise of right-wing populism. Although I could not include her work more extensively in this thesis, I would still like to recommend her books *On the Political* (2005) and *For a Left Populism* (2018).

¹⁵ My own translation of Geert Wilders’ repeated statement ‘Nederland weer voor de Nederlanders’ during the PVV campaigns for the Dutch parliamentary elections in 2017.

doesn't work out in the same way. The semiotic agency that people desire works on two registers for Lazzarato, the signifying meaning producer and the a-signifying machinic register that merely "brings into play" pre-individual affectual components. This notion is crucial when talking about Neoliberalism, even in specific forms such as "simple" instruction videos: the will to have power over your own life is the driving factor that makes blind to the actual working of the semiotic machine. This idea will be revisited throughout much of the rest of this thesis.

The Neoliberal ideal of the "makeable man," the embodiment of the American Dream, is built upon a myth. Rather, people cognitively follow a desire that *lets* them be kneaded into a position in which they experience control over themselves. I want to speak of a *malleable man*.

The search for achievable skills is not a self-development that adds to the core of the pre-established being of the consumer. Actually, the "mass" of a person's potential stays more or less the same. It is, however, merely kneaded around according to social convention. Just like Maurizio Lazzarato puts it, no new subjectivity is created, yet the narrative itself encourages us to believe otherwise.

This "mass" as I have called it, is not *added to* but *molded*, because 'this [machinic] register is not aimed at constituting subject but at capturing and activating pre-subjective and pre-individual elements (affects, emotions, perceptions) to make them function like components or cogs in the semiotic machine of capital' (Lazzarato, "Semiotic Pluralism" n.p.). The modern subject is *letting* this occur as suspension of disbelief, accepting this process perhaps reluctantly or unknowingly but certainly willingly, purely out of the desire for later being able to indeed grow. The malleable man is a person who reduces themselves to embody the Marcellian project piece, whilst constantly changing strategies within the social subjection as Zygmunt Bauman indicated.

This is a constant dualistic process of (re-)positioning, experiencing and trying to understand the Self's position. This simple threefold concept will play a great role in my conceptualization of cognitive phenomenology. In the next chapter, I will analyze how the individual positions themselves within the world of phenomena, or rather, how they are being positioned. Why do we imagine ourselves to be in control, but experience the world so differently? I will dive deeper into the concepts suture, enunciation, deixis, phenomenological intentionality and signifying semiotics, in order to analyze the spectator's relationship towards instructional videos and how this creates the felt interpersonal relationship towards the spectacle.

2. THE INSTRUCTIONAL MODE: ENUNCIATION, DEIXIS AND FAILING INTENTIONALITY

Crucial to understanding Neoliberalism, in would argue, is that the idea of subjectivity works two-fold: on the one hand the agency of being an autonomous “Subject,” on the other the acceptance of becoming a subjected/subjugated entity within the system. Each of us would of course like to pursuit this agent Subject role, but achieving that subject position through signifying semiotic interaction that creates the individual, the actant “I,” is not simply in reach in a capitalist society. This does not mean that capitalism is necessarily against all forms of self-realization, rather it *is* a system of individualization and thus, Lazzarato states that:

The capitalist system, through representation and signification, creates and allocates roles and functions. It provides us with a subjectivity and assigns us to a specific process of individuation (via categories such as identity, gender, profession, nationality, etc.) so that everyone is implicated in a semiotic trap that is both signifying and representative.

(Lazzarato, “Semiotic Pluralism” n.p.)

These semiotic signifiers individualize its subjects, think especially of J. L. Austin’s speech acts and performative language, which purport denotative assertions and just with the power of phrasing can declare a couple married or can attribute an officer with a higher military ranking.

Let’s look at a cinematic example to grasp the notion of semiotic achievability and identity in capitalist society, as a stepping stone towards instruction videos. In Robert Altman’s film *3 Women* (1977), Shelley Duvall’s character Millie Lammoreaux is the embodiment of assumed signification. She is being idolized by her new roommate Pinky Rose, played by Sissy Spacek. Pinky thinks Millie to be ‘the most perfect person I ever met,’ but she does not realize that to all others, Millie is rather *unpopular* and is mostly ignored. Through her use of language, Millie asserts a status of individuality and every time she is being kicked down by others, her composure re-assures her individual role and subjectivity towards Pinky. Eventually, Pinky (whose actual first name is revealed to be Mildred, just like Millie’s) starts to copy her roommate in every signifying way to take over Millie’s various roles in their small community, and actually succeeding with the others whereas Millie kept failing.

Millie’s great objective is to establish herself as an individual through the power of linguistic signifiers. At first, when her roommate starts copying Millie’s manners, Pinky evades reaching a status of “individuality” and thus of subjectivity, because she shows herself to merely be the “dividual” of Millie (cf. Deleuze). But as the latter’s linguistic agency falls away, Pinky is able to jump

into the gap and achieve what Millie was never able to. Pinky understands the workings of signification and sees that '[semiocapitalism] takes the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value,' as Franco Berardi states it (21-22).

In *3 Women*, Pinky clearly takes instructions from Millie to succeed in becoming popular, however she doesn't recognize that Millie is not succeeding herself. Through her semiotic command and the authority that she exudes, Millie seems more than she is, but she does not understand the signifying game that Pinky eventually learns to play. In the initial relation, the two women assume positions that we will recognize from instruction videos, in which there is one authoritative enunciator and one obedient spectator, who mimics every move frantically because of a conviction that it will lead to a certain goal. Pinky's convictions color her phenomenological horizon and she is blind to what truly goes on with her roommate. She eventually overrules Millie and begins to reveal the seams and strings of the system, showing comprehension of signifying and a-signifying workings, which we shall study in the rest of this chapter.

You talkin' to me?!: Deixis and Enunciation in Cinema

Taxi Driver's Travis Buckle isn't the only one who is wondering who is talking to him. Narrative cinema is an art of sound and moving images, that seems to play for our personal scopophilic enjoyment (cf. Mulvey), but theorizing the second-person narrative in film seems a little more complicated than in analyzing literary fiction. To reach a theoretical concept for "enunciation," I will follow Francesco Casetti's intumescence of the topic for the bulk part in this thesis.

Enunciation as a term is in itself not a modern concept, earlier I already pointed out its sparse but effective use in literary fiction. The term has existed for centuries, albeit that its meaning has changed. For the Ancient Romans, enunciation was one of the key skills in the revered art of oration, then meaning: emulating to speak out and to express, addressing their audiences *directly* and so vividly that it became impossible to look away. In the early 1970s, enunciation was re-established as a concept by the French structuralist semiotician Émile Benveniste. The term allowed him to study subjective operative discourse, in which he made distinction between "enunciator" and "enounced." These 'two terms allowed Benveniste to make a distinction between two types of subject: the subject of the enunciation, as opposed to the subject of the enounced' (Hayward 82). For example, if I stand before the mirror and notice that I have put on a few pounds since I started devoting all my spare time into writing this thesis, I might draw the conclusion that "I am getting fat." However, the reflection is not an entity in itself, and the only chubby one is myself, not my image. The "uttered I" is

not the same as the “uttering I,” as they have already moved on. Susan Hayward comments clearly on this:

The spoken subject becomes presence. However the unconscious subject is already beyond that “I” and becoming something else. The spoken subject, subject of the enunciation, now becomes absence. [...] To say “I,” therefore, is not to be it, because the subject of the enunciation (who in enunciating is making a *time-bound* speech act) has already gone past it and is saying and being something else. (idem 83; original italics)

Especially when I would later start to eat more healthy again and train off all of my excess fat, and then were to look at a picture from before, I could still say “I look fat,” but there is no direct integral correlation between the picture and the present “me.” At the same time, I might judge that I *looked* fat, thus comparing the past and present self in my head. Measurable time has lapsed, however as time is understood as a Deleuzian flux, my understanding of Self may be multiple and simultaneous. Like a hyalosign, the actual and the virtual image in my head have intertwined to an indistinguishable understanding (Deleuze 345). In whatever way I would try to formulate this vision in language, I couldn’t possibly give an objective, realistic wording translation, even though I might think that I *am* (think of Wittgenstein’s “beetle-in-the-box”).¹⁶ It marks the difference between being able to something and *thinking* that we are able to do so, which ties in directly to instruction videos.

A great part for the confusion of understanding a-signifying semiotics as being signifying semiotics – the essential goal of worldwide capitalism – stems from this (mis-)understanding of deictic positioning and subjective agency. People constantly create speech acts and semiotic signs to be able to participate in society, because, as we return to Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘in the act of enunciation (in the same way as in every act of creation), [one finds] a power of self-positioning, self-production, and a capacity to secrete one’s own referent emerges’ (*Signs and Machines* 18). Franco Berardi picks up on this and notes that the semiotic world is all-encompassing and in it ‘each producer of semiotic flows is also a consumer of them, and each user is part of the productive processes: all exits are also an entry, and every receiver is also a transmitter’ (107). However we have seen that not all semiotic production is signified. Caught in the workings of this semiotic system,

¹⁶ In *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein conceptualized his thought experiment of “the beetle-in-the-box:” different kids from different backgrounds each hold a box which they claim holds a beetle, but they are not allowed to look into another kid’s box. As each kid may have a different connotation to the word “beetle,” it is possible that not all boxes hold an insect, nor could one tell if even all boxes contain *anything*. Perhaps they believe that the word refers to a rock, a cat, a ball, etc. Instead of different words for the same concept, they might have different concepts, whilst all using the same word; Each kid believes honestly that they are holding what is known as a “beetle” to everyone. Ferdinand de Saussure’s binary system of *signifiant* and *signifié* no longer applies in an asymmetrical language situation.

Lazzarato states that the individualization of the subject is believed to be a direct result from the makeability of the enunciated speech act, because:

The subject of enunciation [...] who says “I” tears himself away from the global, lived, existential dimension of the assemblage, merges with the subject of utterance (“I”), with the “social” linguistic form that precedes and defines him. By molding itself to the subject of the utterance (“I”), the collective assemblage of enunciation submits to the individualizing linguistic machine. The latter, in turn, overcodes semiotic systems and the different expressive modalities of subjectivity in accordance with the modalities of the “semiotic triangle.” The multiplicity of semiotics, the plurality of enunciative focal points, the veritable sources of enunciation, are reduced to the individual subject. (*Signs and Machines* 77)

Nevertheless, the enunciator is not fully in control of the enunciated (Benveniste’s *énoncé*), it is always an imbedded system.

The theoretical disquisition given above has kept close to the figure of the “I,” but enunciation is not a narcissistic concept. As was also the conception of the original Roman oratory meaning of the term, it was a technique of addressing the audience, and so we can’t talk about “I’s” without talking about “you’s.”

In film, enunciation is not *necessarily* an act of verbal speech – although yes, we are eventually going to talk about *direct cinematic address*. You could argue that the original Lumièreian “cinema of attractions” or later narrative cinema’s fourth wall break, in which the character suddenly looks at and acknowledges the spectator, would be direct enunciation, but generally a fictional film is a scopophilic exhibition that plays within its own diegetic world, independent from the spectator. So too is it for the famous film semiotician Christian Metz, who characterized spectatorship as vastly impersonal. There still is a relation drawn up between the film and the spectator, but they are understood ‘as a pre-given entity within a self-enclosed system, a divided subject unified through cinematic suture’ (Hesselberth, “From Subject-effect to Presence-effect” 245). This is not unlike Laura Mulvey in her world-famous article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she theorizes film as inherently voyeuristic and constructed for the scopophilic pleasure of the heterosexual man. It means that the spectator is already implied in its creation by the filmmakers, but nevertheless, the diegesis of the film is completely self-contained in Mulvey’s understanding. This is why watching a film, “spectating,” is such a voyeuristic activity, it is being encouraged by the norms of the culture.

The Italian-American film theoretician Francesco Casetti differs somewhat in his intumescence. For him, spectatorship is an interplay between the screen and the consumer, a back

and forth of transmitting and receiving communicative semiotics. The spectator is already implied by the film and its reception pre-arranged (cf. Buckland 220). This spectator implication means that the film suggests a certain viewing attitude, which unfolds into a screen relationship, albeit obscured through the element of suture, which Jean-Louis Baudry also noticed in his "Apparatus Theory." Watching film is not simply a process of blatant consuming a self-enclosed diegesis, but a constant flow of interaction and meaning. This means that 'for Casetti, film viewing always involves three deictic categories: an "I" (i.e., the enunciator, or filmmaker), a "you" (i.e., the addressee, or spectator), and a "he" (a character or a thing, i.e., the film itself' (Hesselberth, "From Subject-effect to Presence-effect" 245). Casetti's theory, reformulated in the terms from Émile Benveniste's enunciation, leads to the interpretation of André Gaudreault and François Jost, who write that '[Casetti] identifies the filmic enunciator with the "I," the *enunciataire*, that is the addressee of the utterances as "you," and finally, the utterance itself as "he"' (Gaudreault and Jost 60; original italics, as it is cited in their translated article in *A Companion to Film Theory*, edited by Toby Miller and Robert Stam).

This phenomenon is readily visible in the context of our case study of instruction videos. Here, unlike in Metz's conception, there is a *direct* enunciation, a narrator who positions themselves as an "I" and directly addresses a second party, the spectator. The sort of spectator, someone who seeks help or skills for a particular task, is already implied by the maker. The enunciation does not merely occur through the speech, but is already an integral part in the making of the video itself. In Casetti's theory, namely, enunciation is a pre-established game of positioning, not just of verbal address when narrators literally speak about an "I" and a "you." It problematized Metz' theory of filmic enunciation, for whom indication and pronouns could not be a basis for enunciative spectatorship. However, that is exactly what occurs here.

Francesco Casetti's approach is based upon the concept of deixis, a linguistic principle of reference that requires indexical context. Semiotic pioneer C. S. Peirce *indicated* the index to be one of the three kinds of signs (the others being symbol and icon), which denotes a direct (often physical) relation towards the signified. Stanley Cavell has made wonderful use of this term for his continuation of the work of André Bazin and his own theory of skepticism. Closely related to it is deixis, which is a reductive index. These are rather unique terms within the contexts of reference. It is comparable to Jacques Derrida's theory of *différance*, which acknowledges that each word can be explained through definitions or synonyms, which in their turn can be explained through others, and this can go on for a long time. Eventually, however, we reach certain core terms that cannot be described through its features, but can only be conveyed by simply comprehending the denotation. Think of the color "yellow," for instance, it may only be explained to a blind person by other things that *are* yellow, but you cannot give further definition for the word itself. Deictic terms, then, are

certain references to points in space and time, but which are meaningless without direct indexical relation to a context, just like Derrida's final self-contained terms. These deictic terms can be personal ("me" versus "you"), temporal ("yesterday," which only makes sense when brought into context with a point in time understood to be "today"), referential (every "that" needs a distance and a pointing finger), and many more.

Automatically, deictic indication leads to the positioning of the players involved. Its use draws a spatiotemporal context that frames the horizon of our experience (which will be covered in the next subchapter), yet it also establishes a relationship between the indicator and the indicated. Following Casetti's phenomenological theory of deixis, film already pre-supposes its spectator (and their viewing attitude) in its form. More directly, by enunciative address, as we see in instruction videos that try to convey skills and information to "you the viewer," the addressee is drawn into its narrative rather invitingly. In videos on how to tie a tie, the narration often uses phrases such as "*now, you do it like this,*" three deictic terms that bring the spectator in closer, thanks to a feeling of simultaneity and closeness. Filmic suture occurs, and not only does the editing and the familiarity obscure the seams of the montage, but there arises a bond between spectator and spectacle, as if they feel like they *know* the instructor. Persuasion, of course, is supported by affectivity; this is a human good, even a trait that seems to occur in most living beings on this planet. Each experience brings forth bodily sensations, which differ from emotions, and which are (linguistic) constructs.¹⁷ Affectivity is what suddenly grounds our Being in the World – internalized (like that sudden shock of panic that turns the stomach), or externalized (a skeptically raised eyebrow) – these traits are results of experiences beyond our control and take quite a hold over the Subject. Yet affectively, the spectator grows sutured towards the screen.

The self-subjection (the posture of humbleness that the pupil adopts towards the teacher) creates a feeling of reverence within the spectator towards the screen and towards the enunciator. In performing the skill that they try to find in instructional videos, a fascinating phenomenon takes place. When building an IKEA closet without the booklet, baking a cake or – of course – tying a tie, the spectators of instruction videos try to match what is performed on screen, following each step and every advice. They even pause the video if it goes too fast, catch up again and then continue. The solutionist spectator models themselves so directly after what is seen, that they actually mirror the screen as precisely as possible. The reduction of the Self in Neoliberalism is never so clear as it is in

¹⁷ I notice that affect studies and phenomenology are regularly being confused or erroneously understood as two sides of the same coin. Both deal with the (pre-conscious) reception of phenomena in a receptor, however they differ in study and approach. Phenomenology is the study of conscious experiences, mostly in the way in which an entity receives intended phenomena, and subsequently tries to concretize the process. Affect theory focusses on bodily experience, or how the receptor *reacts* to these phenomena. This process *cannot* be put into words.

the total fading of the difference between One and Other. To share in the best result, each should follow the example as precisely as possible, the individual adapts themselves to voluntarily resemble a frightening mold of unity.

The affective relation of suture towards the enunciator plus the mirroring embodiment of the instruction, makes for an incredibly haptic viewing experience, a strong experience of *connectedness*. When someone mirrors the spectated simultaneously, they feel directly what is seen on the screen; their own actions fade into the *spectated* action. When we stand in front of our screens with a loose tie, following every step – especially in the video formats that only show the torso, like *How to tie a tie*, *Math Meeting*, *defragmenteur* and *tiehole* among our case studies – it could be *us* on the screen, as if we were simply standing in front of a mirror (which should eventually be the goal when learning how to tie a tie). A closely viewed image functions as the eventual ultimate index, a pointing finger that indicates the “right way,” which we so admire that it takes us out of the spatiotemporal dimension that we embody and merely exists within the spectacle itself, taking away the seams of the video’s structure, leaving only the warm blanket of spectatorship that is suture (cf. Doane, “The Close-Up” 93-94).

The affective experience magnifies the influence that the psychopolitical system holds, and reaffirms towards the spectator that indeed what skills they are trying to learn is essential for functioning in society, in order to become successful and optimally productive. Then again, the despair over failure becomes thus ever greater: the feeling of failure becomes the feeling of letting someone down, of not seeming to be able to adhere to a set-before standard.

The bond between spectator and spectacle is almost never as intense as in the case of instructional cinema, a position that it probably only shares with state-run propaganda films. It relies on a feeling of presence arises within the spectator, which, Pepita Hesselberth writes, ‘redirects our attention away from the processes of sense-making (without refuting their relevance) towards the bodily-spatial or affective aspects of our engagement with the technologies of sound and vision that valorize our being in the world’ (“From Subject-effect to Presence-effect” 242). The spectator becomes susceptible to a subjective act of spectatorship, which, I would like to add, is often (erroneously) cognitively understood by the viewer to still be objectively formed. One always imagines themselves being in control, most stubbornly, but conscious experience is never objectively decided by the Subject, as both phenomenology and affect studies show us. Yet I would like to underscore firmly that, whilst most affects and intended phenomena occur pre-consciously, the spectator still carries a naïve conviction that they are the “Monarch over all they survey” and still holds a Cartesian view over the body.

It seems obvious and self-explanatory, but it is actually very hard for the subject to recognize

that they are less conscious about the pre-conscious than they think. Assessing the Self, they can only underestimate the influence that experiences have on their overall vision of the world, and can only assess what they are cognitively aware of. This is comparable to the Marcellian split discourse over Self and Body. When watching instruction videos, the subject chooses to do so *consciously*, with the intention of *cognitive* self-improvement, but they forget (or negate) the strong mind-body correlation that ensures that they are greatly affected – pun intended – on the (inter)subjective level of pre-consciousness. There seems to be a difference between the understood cognitive side of experience and the actual phenomenological process, which is firmly undercut in the mind of the spectator, playing into the hand of the ideological superstructure.

Although not produced out of State commission like propaganda cinema, the instructional cinematics also strongly propagate a current hegemony or ideology. This is amplified by the seamless nature of the clips that stimulate the sense that this is a real slice of social life, by the subjective closeness that is felt towards the enunciator and by our own systemized comprehension of the world, all three contributing to Jean-Louis Baudry's theory of the obscured ideology behind the apparatus that, through a Bazinian sense of filmic reality, reprograms the spectator's conscious phenomenological interpretation. In his famous article "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," Baudry argues that 'the world is no longer only an "open and unbounded horizon." Limited by the framing, lined up, put at the proper distance, the world offers up an object endowed with meaning, an intentional object, implied by and implying of the "subject" which sights it' (43). A spectator will focus on the spectacle instead of on the technical formation, and be coerced into a certain "loaded" image. To be able to convincingly present skill-tools to improve upon the Subject, instruction videos will never really unveil the seams of the *decoupage*, let alone the seams in their own capability. Perhaps the instructor may not be as proficient as they make it seem, but we do not see any other reality, than the one that we are being shown. The magic relies on our acceptance of a shown, likely truth.

The Apparatus Theory comes close to explaining how psychopolitics are driven into the conscience of the spectator, of the people. It adjusts our overall comprehension of the world around us and doesn't force us to act in a way, but simply *makes us want* to act accordingly. The overall way in which we understand our being-in-the-world, shapes the direct experience of it, and so too our experience of that so-called filmic slice of life. This understanding of the world will be called "horizon" in the next subchapter, which will further develop our idea of psychopolitical spectatorship.

The Horizons of Expectation

I want to argue bluntly that the problem of (Neoliberal) psychopolitics is a problem of phenomenological intentionality. Although Neoliberalism is a rather twisted ideology, the great problem regarding the system is actually that most people within the society have internalized its logic and beliefs. Unlike in a direct totalitarian state where there is direct physical force struck down upon the subjects to make sure that they stay in line with the authority's demands, the psychopolitical state has ensured that the vision and understanding of the subject has been distorted and rerouted so that they willingly cooperate. Let's remember that for phenomenology, empirically falsifiable reality in no way matters, all phenomena count. Hope and expectation can be intended just as strongly as any other vision and these two categories contaminate the individual's experience of ideology so.

Intentionality, then, is the subject's way of experiencing the world, our operational connection to the phenomenological principle. Although the philosophical field of phenomenology was officially conceived by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century, Husserl built upon earlier notions and concepts from the field of philosophy of psychology. Amongst these was Franz Brentano's idea of intentionality, a term which Brentano on his turn again borrowed from Medieval Philosophy (cf. Dennett, "The Problem of Intentionality" 20). For phenomenology, there is no point in distinguishing reality from imagination because both can be experienced by an observer, and so in order to experience the way in which something *appears* to us, the phenomenon, regardless of whether they are based on truth or mental experiences, one's mind establishes a direction *towards* the phenomenon. The mind is always conscious *of* something, thinking *about* something, etc. In simple terms, this is intentionality as Husserl understood it. His concept indicates the relationality between mind and phenomenon. Brentano, on the other hand, focused more on the objective direction that intentionality takes, because 'one cannot want without wanting *something*, imagine without imagining *something*, hope without hoping for *something*' (idem 21; italics added). Not all objects are physically existent, some are only fantasized and conceptually formed in the mind, but still it is *something that we come to experience*. We understand the world through every (un)conscious act of experiencing we perform, directing our attention and thus sucking up its phenomena and information plenty.

Film – this thesis looks at instruction videos through a greater cinematic discourse – is by definition an intentional medium. Daniel Frampton argues that 'in a sense film offers us our first experience of an *other* [sic] experience (the experience of the film camera as it were). Film seems to be a double phenomenology, a double intention: our perception of the film, and the film's

perception of its world' (Frampton 15; original italics).¹⁸ Experientially, the spectator first intends the film, yet is more directly aware of the presented intentionality that the film presents (in other words they notice the spectacle and the plot rather than their own intention of the process of film-spectatorship), which in a way compares to Baudry's notion of the veiled apparatus and the indication of psychopolitics that Byung-Chul Han presents. Thanks to portable screens, the magic spell of viewing spectacle is even harder to negate, since spatial obstruction no longer poses as a physical (skeptical) barrier. The subject believes to directly intend the spectacle, however without realizing it, they are overcome with this double intentionality. Still, herein lies the power of the instructional video: presenting the absorption of skills as a direct objective goal, without barriers and with great ease.

But consciousness is never truly objective, it is always tainted by our overall understanding of conceptual notions, the phenomenological horizon. Let's explore this notion through a few examples: When a film actor is in a scene, but for a moment not in the shot, I understand that he is still supposed to be *there*, yet out of sight. However, when an actor in a live play walks off stage, I understand that he is no longer part of the scene. The conscious experience of something goes beyond direct observation, it still has to do with the spectator's conceptual cognition. Since I understand the differences between the conceptual characteristics of the two art forms, my intention is still colored without realizing it. When I see a cube only from one side, making it look like a mere square, I still experience it as a cube when I *think* of it as a cube. Although I cannot see the other sides, it is virtually present in my conceptual understanding of the hexahedron shape. This is why we do not experience music tone for tone and moment for moment, but experience it as a flow, in long stretches of protention and retention.

A cinematic example: In Satyajit Ray's film *The Music Room [Jalsaghar]* (1958) there is an elaborate scene in which Roshan Kumari, a famous Indian Kathak dancer, dances for an audience in the music room in front of an enormous mirror. This mirror is meant to give the audiences, both the extra-diegetic spectators watching the film and the diegetic spectators in the music room *in* the film, a simultaneous view of her front and backside during her moving and turning. It is a magnificent shot for pure aesthetic and scopophilic pleasure, but not necessary for giving us the ability to imagine a three-dimensional image of the dancer. Were Kumari to wear a "Kick Me" sign on her back, then indeed we might not be able to see it without the mirror, but phenomenology is the study of phenomena as we experience them, not of inquiring empirical "truths." And so it is our

¹⁸ Although I do quote from and indeed do like quite a few parts of this work, I am very critical of Daniel Frampton's *Filmosophy*, as it plays fast and loose with phenomenological principles and as a result draws certain (in my opinion) false conclusions. Even though it is definitely a much "juicier" read, I would recommend Allan Casebier's *Film and Phenomenology* and especially Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye* over Frampton's book to anyone scholarly interested in the field of film (and) phenomenology.

consciousness that already imagines and *experiences* a 3D-image of the dancer without needing to really see all sides. Humans are capable of observing non-observable objects through its understanding of concepts, characteristics and essences. Husserl calls this the eidetic intuition, which allows us to imagine the properties of a triangle, without needing to see all possible angled forms of triangles (cf. Mazijk 42-43). It is somewhat of a trained skill, which means to learn conventions and to understand a medium, before being able to truly engage with it. The rather exaggerated anecdote of the audience that watched *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* in 1896 and being terrified of a train approaching the screen may not be historically accurate, it does however illustrate how the individual needs to first get familiar with new technologies in order to be able to really interact with them. This familiarity builds horizon and in its turn intentionality converts itself to a directional understanding of whatever we encounter with it. I experience all sides of the chair, because I have an understanding of the essence of the chair. I experience all sides of Roshan Kumari, because I have an understanding of film, of dancing, and, crudely put, of the anatomy of a person. But intentional horizons can also be influenced, and in a way we are more susceptible to instruction, because we believe to understand its authority in a certain manner. Experiences influence our ideas, ideas influence our experiences.

The stance that Merleau-Ponty took in his phenomenological theories that agitated against René Descartes's division between body and mind as independent entities, started with the simple notion that anything we consciously understand or grasp, has been internalized through our senses and thus our bodily interaction with the world. This lifelong interplay has created and continuously shapes our phenomenological horizon, which is both deeply personal and intersubjective through our shared societies. What we have (physically) experienced in the past, shapes the way in which we then experience the present world around us. And so, the thing that we experience is never to be experienced merely as a thing on its own, but the experience is co-constructed by the spatial entities surrounding it and by the temporally past (or even future) conscious that incorporates the intentional. Nevertheless, this experience is mostly *intuitively* formed and not *consciously*, it is formed through the sense of awareness. This guides our intention of hope and expectation, but most often the subject is not aware that they are intending at all (cf. Husserl's "natural attitude"). Blinded by hope, they are reluctant to accept a certain reality, just like how they can be blinded by ideologies.

The idea of watching a spoof film, think of mockumentaries or *any* Mel Brooks film, is that it only works when you are aware of the (tongue-in-cheek) tone of the film, plus are familiar with the tropes of the genre that the film is spoofing. This too relies on pre-established knowledge that translates into a phenomenological horizon. When the spectator is unaware that a mockumentary *is* a mockumentary, they might *assume* it to be a strange documentary, a (mis)recognition of a genre which automatically denotes feelings of truth and reality. In 2004, Jenna Fischer (one year before her

worldwide fame for portraying Pam in *The Office*) directed *LolliLove*, a “documentary” about a rich couple that tries to boost the morale of homeless people in their region by handing out lollipops with cheerful messages in the wrappers. Whoever isn’t in on the form, is not in on the joke. The film is a stab against the wealthy class that only engages in charity for their own gain, but caused a bit of a commotion when it came out, with certain spectators believing that the filmmakers chose to follow a real and immoral yuppie couple. The understanding of the spectacle *an sich* steers much of the affectual effect that comes right after it. Initial decisive awareness within the spectator precedes the eventual overruling pre-conscious experiential workings of a film.

When a cinematic medium spoofs the instructional mode that we have been focusing on in this thesis, typically it then adopts the corresponding tropes that come with it, from the convincing of the inherent ideological logic, to the tips on how to improve within that system. A goofy example is *Saturday Night Live’s* short “A Ladies Guide to Party Planning,” which takes the form of one of the many 1950s PIF’s for ladies (read: “housewives”), but unsubtly hammers down on the obedient role that was being encouraged for women in that time period, through silly tips such as ‘avoid looking at the newspaper, as it may give you ideas,’ or ‘greet men by the word “mister” followed by their full name, greet women by their husband’s name, or not at all.’ The joke of this short film lies not in the ever stranger tips that enunciator “Marjorie Pettibone” offers her spectators, but resembling the serious and recognizable tone in which real Public Information Films are presented.

Nevertheless, I prefer *CollegeHumor’s* instruction video which so well encompasses what we have been looking at. In “How to Tie a Tie: A Beginner’s Guide,” cast member Brian Murphy addresses the spectator directly and shows the process step by step, just like in any other tie tying video, but instead he adopts an extremely sarcastic, passive aggressive tone. He (or rather his character of course) is not merely aware of the solutionist intention of his audience that came to this video in order to learn a skill, rather he is aware that the people who watch this (type of) video *lack* a certain basic social ability: ‘Welcome. You’ve clicked on this video because you don’t know how to tie a tie, and *wikiHow* has too many words in it. You’re either a thirteen year old boy on the way to his bar mitzvah, or a twenty-something man-child who frankly should know better.’ Murphy stays polite but extremely poisonous in his speech, and despite of the fact that *how* he says things derives far from the common tropes of instruction films, the instructional form, *what* he says, not that much. He then explains every step of the way, just as overly clear as most “real” tie-tying instruction videos do, but Murphy keeps commenting on the incompetence of the sort of person that would watch these videos. He addresses this person in the conventional way for the genre, he enunciates and keeps addressing a “you.” The spectator is the direct butt of the joke here, unlike the *SNL* “Ladies Guide” that forms its jokes via an impersonal subject as ‘A lady should...,’ etc. In between the stares and the insults that cynically state that ‘your father is ashamed of you, [...] is he not in the picture?,’ narrator

Murphy eventually does get to a tied tie, and with him – if they are able to stand it – so does the spectator. Comedy-wise, spoof instructions don't get much better than this, but it still has also actually served its purpose of teaching the skill in question.

Then again, this is only funny to the spectator lying on his couch watching comedy videos, but not solutionist spectator standing in front of the mirror, the loose tie hanging around his mirror and his self-confidence shattered. Whether or not they were initially aware that it concerned a parody-esque clip here, each spectator first brings in their intentional reason for deciding to consume a medium, for instance to either learn from it or to laugh about it. And strictly speaking, you could still learn how to tie a tie from *CollegeHumor's* video, whereas you cannot from learn how to plan parties from *SNL's* video. A phenomenological horizon is formed through intention and desire, building expectation, which can be shattered or backfire in many ways, not in the least through the painful lessons that failure brings with it.

It is hard to keep up confidence, especially in this age of readily available data. Consuming media means something else than to interpret data, even though both have great impact on the attribution of meaning to the individual and thus to their overall horizon.

Our current age has been defined by the abundance of information technology and the datafication of all facts of life. This is no new fact. Nevertheless, it is worthy to note that the *way* in which the focus on data, cancels all meaning. Big Data is the collection and storing of all acquirable coded information, without necessary unpacking or denotation. Noted Belgian legal scholar Antoinette Rouvroy has often criticized this digital Neoliberal age and the hypercompetitive society it has produced. For her, semiotic signification seems to have been abstracted as much as possible to create fileable data, leading to a point in which all that 'is left are only a set of indexes' (Rouvroy 9). On that note, I would like to contest the popular notion that data is the direct coding and storing of interpreted life, as if it was all simply translated, transferred and stored into computer languages and are readily and capably available to us. Data is in itself illegible, and so 'this postmodern Tower of Babel' (Kittler, "There is No Software" 148) relies on human interpretation. In Lacanian terms, this means that the illegible streams of data are in itself Symbolic, but encountered as if they were Imaginary, like "human" languages. Remember that you always interact with the eventual interface of the program, not with the underlying lines of code, whatever sense of control a media platform too may try to infer in its users.¹⁹

Then to return to Rouvroy. The inability to directly interact with non-semiotic data would

¹⁹ This is a theoretical point that has also been strongly alluded to similarly by other media scholars, amongst which are the interesting takes on the subject by Vilém Flusser in *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, and by Friedrich A. Kittler in his article "There is No Software."

mean that people have to rely more and more on algorithmic processing without direct evaluation. She notes how this bypasses subjectivity, which relates to our earlier notion of psychopolitical workings. The feeling of uncertainty that this produces fuels the disinterest of the Subject:

The virtual is the dimension that apprehended by the real; it is this dimension of possibilities that which any form of presence fears. For instance, the fact that us human beings are individually not entirely contained in actuality. We are inhibited by our dreams, by our past, but also inhabited by our future and the projections that we make and what we imagine around us. (Rouvroy, in Rouvroy and Stiegler 13-14)

Driven by angst and uncertainty, the individual follows certain patterns and tries to engage. As with the Lacanian linguistic understanding given above, it is presumable that the individual tries to attach and attribute meaning to “empty” indexical data. Partly, it is like filling in the gap in phenomenological essentialism. In a world in which is overflowed with purely indexical data that brings no direct semiotic signification, the subjugated individual attempts to read attributed meaning into it as a way to stay afloat. Like in Lazzarato’s distinction between signifying and a-signifying semiotics, it is noted that a-signifying semiotics are often approached as if they act as signifiers, unrecognizable as they are in their prominence.

Signifying semiotics are factors of individualization. They create roles, genders, etc., and they lead to a distinguishable Subject and the Being of an individualized I-position (cf. Robert Altman’s *3 Women*). Self-help videos are based upon a feeling of connectedness and trust, and create the (illusory) belief that they will help you with regaining a subject position, however, they mostly teach a pre-determined social standard, that does not have an individualizing, Deleuzian working, who recognized that individuals were being turned into “dividuals.” It seems to react rather contrary to individualized subjectivation, even if we do not recognize it as such. Neoliberalism promotes this false understanding and through markers such as stock markets, virtual (crypto) money and so too instructional media: they discourage actual individualization. All bring in images and certain set beliefs, but only allocate certain effects, and it recognizes no individuals, even though we are inclined to believe otherwise. As I quoted Lazzarato before in this thesis: ‘with neoliberal deterritorialization, no new production of subjectivity takes place’ (*Signs and Machines* 8). He therefore calls a-signifying semiotics a political act (“Semiotic Pluralism” n.p.).

Our tie-tying case studies work in that same way. The suture and the haptic experience in instructional videos trigger affectual responses within the spectator. These are pre-subjective elements, which act indifferent towards the subject – and in all fairness, the instructional narrator has no clue of whom they’re speaking to anyhow, thus indifference towards the (in)dividual seems rather plausible. Through these pre-subjective and pre-individual workings, one tries to make certain

assumptions and rely on the a-signifiers as if they were acting as signifiers, often believing that they are, thanks to the images and effects that they bring about. In the end, instruction videos truly act out as a-signifiers, inferring in its spectators a belief that these are acting on a subjective semiotic level, whilst actually taking away any possibility for them to become an individual, an actual Subject. The instructional mode is a veiled hegemonic protuberance that in its inherent techniques may even have great intentions for helping others, but in the end may reach a contrary goal.

This whole errancy is grounded on a *failed* understanding of experiences and semiotic agency, which again is being exploited. That exploitation is aided by a person's secret longing for reaching their goals, which has induced hope and through the expectations linked to their horizon, it brings about a distorted trust in what they then transcendently intend.

Breaking away from this seems not all that evident in such a hegemonic stronghold, but as we will see in the next chapter, possessing philosophical free will is still very possible, even *within* this system.

3. SURVIVAL SKILLS AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF FREE WILL

Instructional videos as an educational phenomenon are nowadays consumed by people of all ages, whether they are mandatorily viewed in the context of some school or workplace regulation, or individually chosen and watched on the internet. Non-access to textual or cinematic instructions feels like a disablement from (the requirements of) society. The individual has grown accustomed to their form and their workings.

The origin of the forms of these instruction videos lie in the vast range of early educational cinematic films, but these are now probably hardly (willingly) watched anymore. The great exception to this would be Louis J. Gasnier's legendary informational film *Reefer Madness* from 1936, which warned the youth – but more importantly it warned the watchful parents to this youth – for the dangers of marihuana use. Gasnier's crew did evidently little research into the effects of marihuana and all the (terribly wooden) actors seem to be acting out the effects of cocaine or amphetamines: they become frantically hyperactive, paranoid, oversexualized, start playing the piano like a madman, and eventually even attempt rape and murder, very unlike the mellow state that is usually experienced by the drug and is known from stoner comedies like Cheech and Chong's classic *Up in Smoke* from 1978. In the final scene of *Reefer Madness*, the school principal holds a PTA meeting and warns all the present parents that 'the next tragedy may be that of your daughter... or your son... or yours...', pointing towards the camera as menacingly as Mr. Scratch does in *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. Almost four decades later when the film had already fallen in the public domain, *Reefer Madness* would be rediscovered. It quickly received a status of being one of the worst movies ever made and gained an enormous cult following. The film is now, ironically enough, very often watched by potheads *while* smoking weed.

Overall, this genre in cinema is perceived as dead and replaced. In form, the Public Information Films such as *Reefer Madness* and many other well-intended initiatives like it inspired the formal developments of instructional film from the cinema screen into the *YouTube* clips we now hold in the palm of our hand. In line with digital solutionism, they have arguably strayed away from public awareness towards individual consumerism. However, in 2020 a fictional film came out that nostalgically re-purposed all the tropes of the classic PIF's and yet also showed acute awareness of the modern instructional video, in order to create a meta-commentary on the nature of instructional cinema: Quinn Armstrong's *Survival Skills*. It made its appearance at various film festivals around the globe and its uniqueness can already be found in the fact that these different festivals categorized

the film either under thriller or comedy; in 2020, the *Leiden International Film Festival* simply filed it under “Bonkers.” The film is both indicative of the general sense of training videos yet spoofing it, which at times unveils the apparatus behind the spectacle and lets us question the actual claim of inevitability that psychopolitical media purports. As it shows us, free will could still be possible, despite of the “limited choice freedom” of Neoliberalism.

Training in the Static: Survival Skills (2020)

Survival Skills takes the form of a police training video from the 1980s and ‘is aimed at teaching young rookies the ins and outs of police work.’ The film was shot digitally and then transferred to a physical VHS tape, which the director then personally assaulted with a magnet, scissors and a lighter to create that old VCR static, and then transitioning it back to a digital file. This gives the spectator in the cinema nostalgia for VHS and for those well-known infomercial aesthetics, without having to add those effects digitally. Despite the status of near brilliance that I attribute to the film, it was received lukewarm by a number of people and so in spite of its 88% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*, it only holds a 5.6 average on *IMDB*. Perhaps this is because *Survival Skills* is not necessarily an “easy watch.” For fans of fast paced police flicks, its unconventional plotline – if we could even call it that – is too often stalled with (intentionally) awkward pauses and a sense of humor that grows more uneasy as the film progresses. For the spectators that like slow cinema and/or like to experience cinema in a more engaged and affective way, any possibility for immersion is constantly being disrupted by the VHS static and the Narrator’s regular postmodern insistence on taking away the illusion of the spectacle (which will be dealt with later in this chapter). It is easy to state what the film is not, but for its unique form and narrative choices, it is hard to precisely explain what it then is.

Survival Skills is presented as a training video ‘from Survival Solutions, created specifically for the graduates of the Middletown Police Academy,’ but all this initial set-up proves to be little more than a MacGuffin to pull the spectator into its strange diegetic reality. Initially, the film sketches various situations that a police officer could encounter on their beat and how they should deal with this, all brought in a light and fun way. Then the tone of the film grows slowly darker and darker, because reality turns out to be much more unpredictable than what any training could prepare you for. During the film’s progression, the story digresses from its “original educational form” to speak up about the sadly topical subject of urban (police) violence, which shows to be already encouraged in the education of policemen, inducing paranoia and stimulating the quick (and excessive) use of weapons. In one scene, recruits are trained to stab knives – hardly the sort of weapon for a policeman – by a toxic masculine loudmouth wearing a shirt that reads “My pen is huge.” The film

picks up on the current Black Lives Matter discussions in a fascinating way. Nevertheless, I want to focus on the instructional tone that the film takes, alluding to the form that we have seen in the instructional videos on how to tie a tie, and on how it digresses from that classic form to ask questions about the positioning of a self when opposite a narrator, and essentially questions free will in instructional relationships.

And so we start with the enunciation. As befits an instructional video, the viewer of *Survival Skills* is greeted by a friendly, bearded gentleman in a studio, in front of an American flag and a not so subtle photograph of Ronald Reagan. This Narrator is played by Stacy Keach, who actually played police sergeant Stedenko, in the aforementioned buddy stoner comedy *Up in Smoke*.²⁰ He speaks directly towards the “camera you”, but also introduces an “avatar you” at the same time, similar to the narrative technique of the public information films from the beginning of the instructional cinema, which also often started with an illustrative character and the simple explication that “this is you.” This avatar (in the film) is meant to act out the sketched situations that are played before us, so there is both a direct enunciative address when the Narrator is *visually* in the picture and an indirect enunciation when “you” are *represented* through the avatar. ‘Your name is Jim,’ the Narrator tells us to introduce the avatar: a naively happy officer in uniform appears (blond, curly-haired Vayu O’Donnell), ‘and you’re a policeman.’ Jim is (or in a sense *you are*) introduced as a generic young white male with a perfect Reaganesque nuclear family life, consisting of a generic sweet girlfriend who makes her own jam and a generic sitcom dad who takes him out fishing. Jim is an ideological prototype for the instructional exposition of these type of training videos and constantly keeps naively smiling, talking and interacting like a robot pre-programmed with only a basic understanding of the world as it is presented in the training. However, the world around him is grim and grimy, very unlike the usual diegesis of solutionist training videos. This makes Jim an anomaly, a robotic fish out of water opposite his very realistically-minded and likely depressed partner cop Allison. In a way, Jim looks very much like a Ken doll taken out of the Barbie Mansion and put on the streets. Life will undoubtedly turn out differently from how it is presented by the instructional film.

‘Lesson Two: Your First Call.’ The Narrator takes out a spin wheel with different possible criminal situations, it lands on “Domestic Violence” and the Narrator looks disappointed with the outcome of such an unpleasant (virtual) situation: ‘Well, cadets, it’s not always sunshine and lollypops out there, sometimes you have to get *tough*. And Jim’s first assignment is about the toughest there is.’ The basic principles of dealing with domestic violence are given to the spectator with god-awful 80s computer animation, as the basic step program SMENS: Safe approach, making

²⁰ To be able to distinguish between the general concept of a narrator and Stacy Keach’s character in this film, I will write “Narrator” with a capital N when specifically talking about Keach’s character as a visible or audible *actor* within the film.

Notes, Emotions, Partition and finally Solve, but when Jim and Allison arrive, the dispute between the shouting Mr. and Mrs. Jennings appears not that simple to keep under control as was presented through the SMENS program. The simple-minded Jim's confusion (and possibly fear) is elevated through the VHS static and quick intercut montage. It makes for an unpleasant viewing experience. Allison simply discards the domestic abuse, because no charges would be pressed by either the insistent husband Mark or by the humbled wife Leah, but Jim is visibly affected by this incident and becomes emotionally involved. A few other possible training situations are acted out and although Jim precisely follows the training procedures, he is beaten up mercilessly by a motorcyclist. Pondering at his precinct desk, Jim loses his constant smile and naïve demeanor and while the narrator says 'Jim decided to head home,' Jim decides to contact Leah Jennings. The narrator repeats the command but Jim ignores it, much to the Narrator's chagrin. The Narrator keeps rewinding the training tape to 'try that again, shall we?,' but the outcome plays out the same every time. During the film, and against the wishes of Allison, the Police Chief and most of all the frustrated Narrator, Jim keeps trying to find a shelter and money to harbor Leah and her stepdaughter Lauren from Mark.

A dimensional split is occurring in the film's diegesis, one that is narrated and instructed, another that is acted out against the aforementioned instructions and although they often intertwine, Jim ceases to be a puppet for the training video. The Narrator tries to regain the upper hand over his creation and sets Jim's video aside to introduce a different training video on protesters named 'Use of Force in Public Spaces,' starring another officer-in-training avatar called Jane. The original concept of the film is taken up again and presented afresh, but halfway through the instruction, Jim is seen walking through the background and the camera suddenly breaks off the virtual situation to follow him instead. The camera crew doesn't seem interested in Jane's situation anymore and the whole training is simply abandoned, simply to keep filming Jim walking, eating and talking, whilst the protest is heard continuing in the background. The Narrator loses his temper: 'Has everyone gone crazy but me? There's nothing left to learn from Jim Williams. I would know, wouldn't I? It's my story. I'm the goddamn narrator!'

As Jim keeps failing to provide for Leah and Lauren and keeps upsetting all authorities' orders, his girlfriend leaves him and the Jennings women are forced to return to Mark. The training video starts all over again and replays scenes from the beginning and the Narrator has taken up the power again – '[Jim has] learned the importance of following department procedure at all times' –, but the girlfriend has now been replaced with a dummy and behind Jim's chipper smile is only emptiness left; he seems to have snapped. After the credits roll, the VHS quality is suddenly lifted for digital sharpness. A telephone call comes in from Mark, who lets Jim hear the heavy breathing and crying of Leah. At the Jennings House, he finds disarray and seeing blood, he fears the worst. Jim starts to drive away. For the first time, the Narrator physically appears in the back of his car instead

of in his usual instruction studio and says 'you're way off script now, Jim...' He talks in on Jim's conscience, for the first time speaking to the character Jim, instead of to the indirect avatar "you Jim." When he gets out of the car, the lights come on and it is revealed that the whole set-up is merely a green-screen filled film studio in which the car was parked. What is diegetically real and what is merely virtually created by the narrator's speech act powers? 'And that's what happens in real life,' the Narrator now speaks towards the spectator again, 'but this is not real.'

When he snaps his fingers, the studio disappears and the police car is suddenly parked at an outfield next to Mark Jennings's car. Jim strips off his uniform and prepares for mano-a-mano combat, but he is beaten, chased and stabbed multiple times by Mark. He flees to a baseball cage, finds a bat and bludgeons Mark... Then, there is only the Narrator left, back in his studio but stripped of all the props and attributes that were seen earlier. Desolately, he sighs, drinks a glass of whisky and silently looks at the spectator, during which the diegetic illusion is again lifted and all the green-screens, lights, ventilation pipes and filming equipment are shown. The studio is deserted, except for the Narrator. The lights are cut and only a static television remains...

Survival Skills is an incredibly intelligent film, far more than simply a well-executed (late) postmodern work. In its form it is a unique film unlike any other, which subtly but compulsory submits the poignant questions to the spectator and being both nostalgic and avant-garde at the same time through its VHS aesthetics.

Epistemic Hunger and Free Will: Dennett, Marcel and the Seams of the Apparatus

Quinn Armstrong's film is built up out of the narrative characteristics from classic Public Information films, not unlike these characteristics were reworked for fiction in *Blast of Silence* and for the humorous take that was seen in *Donald's Crime*. But although these two revert the genre, they do not show the cracks in the apparatus and do not lift the veil over the ideology just as *Survival Skills* does. But what does the film reflect on about the genre itself? Why is it that when we look for an instruction video, whether for solutionist or other reasons, we feel hierarchical asymmetry towards the narration, and furthermore, why do we feel the need to indeed *follow* the instructions given, as if there is only one way to succeed? Since in this thesis we have already established an understanding of the psychopolitical Neoliberal undertone on which many instructional videos are feeding, it pays to think: when instruction is presented as a given, are you necessarily forced into the role of subjected consumer inescapably?

In its approach towards instructional cinema, *Survival Skills* questions the humble docility that the subject adopts when consuming these media, which is one of the cornerstones of the

psychopolitical influence of Neoliberalism. It seems that because of the ideological sense of logical conclusion that is interred within the Neoliberal subject, free will is a limited good, and – even if it were possible to act on free will within the system – it effects contrary to desired outcome. This, however, does not necessarily need to be the case, as *Survival Skills* shows us, which I wish to illustrate by means of the contemporary American philosopher and “prophet of the free will:” Daniel Dennett, whose work on intentionality has already featured earlier in this thesis.

For most people, Daniel Dennett is now most well-known for being one of the so-called “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” four public intellectuals that have both as a quartet and individually promoted atheism and criticized religious belief: neuroscientist Sam Harris, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, investigative journalist Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett. Nevertheless, Dennett is a prominent thinker in many more fields than just being a skeptic of religion: as a philosopher, he has made great contributions in the fields of cognitive science and philosophy of mind and he is noted for both letting scientific evidence guide his philosophical inquiries and vice versa providing theoretical philosophical backing for scientific findings. His thought is thus empirical and skeptical of metaphysical imagination. Nevertheless he is not a naïve apologist for scientific discoveries, and since science is a study of falsification, Dennett tries to use his philosophical enquiries as a tool for falsifying hypotheses. As a staunch defender of the idea of free will, Dennett is nowadays often brought into debate with neuroscientists who claim that there already is a neurological impulse in the body that *does* an action before it is *willed* in the brain. Dennett rigorously rejects this idea of inescapable determinism – a term that has been used extensively in Calvinist doctrine to explain predestination – on the basis of moral perseverance. He illustrates this in his thought experiment of the “Nefarious Neurosurgeon:” A surgeon inserts a microchip into the brain of a patient to help him suppress his OCD (a technology that actually does exist). When the patient wakes up, the surgeon comes to him and she tells him that the operation was a success, but that the chip does not only suppress his obsessive compulsory tensions, but controls everything that he does, disabling his free will. The man lives his life, eventually gets into mischief and is brought before court, where he pleads that he could not help his actions because he has no free will. The neurosurgeon is put on trial and she has to admit that it was a joke, but it turns out that it was quite a dangerous joke (cf. “Daniel Dennett: Stop Telling People They Don't Have Free Will | Big Think”). Making the patient *believe* that he does not have free will, resulted in passive resignation, a thing that for Dennett illustrates the problem of neuroscientists telling people that free will is an illusion, yet it also could illustrate the workings of ideological psychopolitics upon the individual. It makes *believe* that there is no other option for the subjugated individual and that they have no true power to change it.

Determinism and free will are not mutually exclusive, but can very well exist side by side, which Dennett calls compatibilism. In the end, free will then means the acknowledgment of different probable futures, even when you are deterministically subjected to a certain way of life, as with the “Nefarious Neurosurgeon.” You still adhere to a mental notion of “Self,” the opposite would then be to stay reluctant and to adopt an attitude of passivity. As Dennett’s thought is described in the blurb of the book *Just Desserts: Debating Free Will*, which he authored with fellow philosopher Gregg D. Caruso who takes the counterpoint position in the debate, ‘self-control is key; we are not responsible for becoming responsible, but are responsible for staying responsible, for keeping would-be puppeteers at bay.’

Survival Skills is full of deterministic instructional speech, but it shows great awareness for personal agency. Like any other instruction video, the film is set up with an educational tone and the expositional commentary track of the narrator is acted out via the character of Jim. However, unlike in the classic instructional mode that the film is intertextually citing, Jim shows that he possesses free will. Much to the Narrator’s (and his own) surprise, he is able to ignore the instructions given, he no longer merely functions as the expositional illustration. You could argue that the medium “film” is by definition a deterministic medium, since there is never a possibility of seeing it play out differently. The sequence is an enclosed whole that does not rely on the players in each performance to succeed, as is to be expected from a symphony or a theatre play. Even when a film is re-edited for a Director’s Cut, or even in a postmodern case like Jonathan Lynn’s cult film *Clue* (based on the boardgame *Cluedo/Clue*, in which the outcome of whom the murderer was depended on which theatre you visited or on what “reel” you picked on the DVD), the outcome is each time simply preestablished anew and will again play out as it is now supposed to do.²¹

Usually the personified character in instruction videos (or so too in telemarketing infomercials) acts as an illustration to the expositional narration and/or as a comedic bouncing off point that yells out that “there’s gotta be a better way,” but the narrator’s voice acts as the deterministic omnipotence that holds the character by its strings. When Jim first diverts from the script and telephones Leah Jennings, against the will of the Narrator, he shows free will where he should not be allowed to do so. The scene (or rather the training tape) is rewind a few times for the Narrator to pick up the control again, but each time, Jim takes the upper hand. This is the diffusion of different possible, probable futures, which marks the initiation of Dennett’s free will principle. According to the tropes of the genre, the individual character should not be given subjective control over the narration, the *Survival Skills* suggests a possibility for the opposite. On a few occasions, Jim

²¹ It is a shame that I couldn’t include Jonathan Lynn’s *Clue* more in this thesis, as it has multiple times been a topic of discussion between me and Peter Verstraten. I consider it both an epistemological and film-ontological masterpiece.

strays away from the Narrator's will, who subsequently retorts in furious anger. It is mostly at these moments of clashing that the film (or "the tape" if you will) goes static. These moments show the vulnerability of both the character Jim and of the controlled medium itself, and thus violently introduces the seams of the machine, which suture always tries to erase (cf. Hayward 377).

Eventually, the Narrator unplugs the simulation to stop Jim's narrative, which suddenly shows all the green screens and the studio in which the video was being filmed, violently ripping the spectator out of the immersive illusion of cinema, away from the seamless visions that Baudry was so appalled by.

Survival Skills makes us question the legitimacy of the instruction industry. In the Neoliberal age, the individual has become rather dependent on the principle of instructions, and as mentioned before, many instruction videos open with the affirmation that certain skills are required to function and to climb up within society. The position between the spectator and the narrator becomes so hierarchical, that for the subjected individual, it feels like there is no other choice. Life itself becomes a deterministic narrative, but straying away from this narrative is definitely possible. Within reason, determinist reasoning is a form of experience that is strongly focused on (imagined) cohesive cognitive understanding over personal preferences. To be more specific, these preferences are molded to resemble those of the Neoliberal ideology. This is disheartening, since it feels like a forced path, but we could certainly use a violent reminder like *Survival Skills* to realize the compatibilist potential.

To approach this notion through a Husserlian lens, it means to approach the experienced world through the phenomenological reduction, thus becoming aware of the way in which it is conveyed to us, namely through an ideological discourse. This does not change our position within, but it does take away the understood notion of "natural experience," which in its turn gives way to the acceptance of inevitable psychopolitics. The acceptance of the plural probabilities gives way to awareness that we are looking at society through an ideologically tainted horizon. It makes us aware of the experience, just like how *Survival Skills* suddenly and purposefully shows the seams of the apparatus. The spectator starts to understand the essence of ideology, and although they can hardly escape the social contract (again let's think of David Hume commenting on John Locke), they are at least endowed with a moral understanding of personal responsibility, against the weight of social responsibility. And in a world of lost subjectivity (cf. Rouvroy), that is one giant leap out of the individual helplessness, despite of the all-encompassing surrounding of the individual by ubiquitous media, and thanks to our new look at media. Husserl pairs well with Dennett in this regard, both give us the tools to see our own position within a world over which we hold so little power.

Ideology ensures us that there is only one beset, desired standard and media is its messenger. Until the subject realizes these workings and is made aware of the way in which the

phenomena are presented to them (which Edmund Husserl saw as his life task), they cognitively approach this with nothing less than the conscious belief in this unshakable truth. Cursed by stress and struck by failure, they are belittled yet the conviction remains, for every instruction video ensures us that certain skills are required to succeed, or worse, promises to fill your life with more purpose and happiness. Come we to understand the compatibilist possibility, then we may still be endowed in the Neoliberal clutches, yet come to understand our personal moral freedom. It may not free us from the shackles, but it is certainly a training to free us from the sense of urgency and duty with which the instructional industry lures us.

CONCLUSION

*Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion /
And the act / Falls the Shadow [...]*

*Between the conception / And the creation / Between the emotion /
And the response / Falls the shadow*
(T. S. Eliot, 69-70)

The current socio-political climate seems to be all about desires, subsequent failure, bouncing back and repeating over and over again, but always we keep the hope that one day we will succeed if we stick with the rules. Neoliberalism (and generally capitalism) is a political system that encourages people to accept subjugation. As a competitive system it ironically produces very few “winners” and although the system’s hegemonic ideas are still commonly practiced, classical Neoliberalism is not actively preached (anymore) in contemporary politics. Then where does the Neoliberal drive come from? Everyone seems caught up in it and no one seems to be truly responsible, and so, like Slavoj Žižek argues, we should ‘not blame people and their attitudes: the problem is not corruption or greed, the problem is the system that pushes you to be corrupt’ (Žižek n.p.). Nonetheless, the weight still presses down on the individual.

Could there be someone responsible? A big part of Naomi Klein’s criticism against the Neoliberalist system relies on her idea of the shock doctrine’s hold on modern society, which she personifies in the figure of Milton Friedman.²² However, this seems oversimplified. Neoliberalism should not be imagined to have gone extinct after the death of Friedman and his colleagues from the *Chicago School of Economics*, it in fact is still very much alive and culturally dominant. What has been established is a system that keeps its subjects optimally productive yet *just* on the brink of a burn-

²² Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* is a very well-substantiated theory, however I was hesitant to include more of her thought into this thesis, as it often clashes with Byung-Chul Han’s. As the latter indicates in *Psychopolitics*, Neoliberalism is a system of illusory logical conviction that forms the basis for the thought and action of the subjected individual, which slowly brings forth conviction, as opposed to Klein’s focus on aggressive “shocks” as the tools for Neoliberalism. Han’s outline was also more in line with the ideas of Berardi and Lazzarato, who ground much of my thought, and so I sadly had to exclude Klein’s work for the most part.

out, which, as the German cultural philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has pointed out, is being controlled and emphasized through:

Media that are entirely devoted to the task of keeping the informed nation alive in a state of *constant* stress. The nation is a hysterical and panicked information system that needs to *constantly* get excited, get stressed out, even terrorize itself and be brought into panic to impress itself, and to, like a stressful and distraught community, convince itself that it truly exists. (Sloterdijk, *Der starke Grund, zusammen zu sein* 41-42; my translation, italics added)²³

I have italicized these two words in Sloterdijk's text to emphasize that although it relates to Klein's argument of panic and stress, it is an ongoing phenomenon that always lingers, and is not merely existing in moments of shock. As I have argued, psychopolitics have changed the way in which we understand the world and desire certain actions that play along to the tune of ideology. Moreover, it has influenced our phenomenological experiences of the world in order to divert our horizontal understanding, making us strive for a better future. And thus, we cling to the driftwood that has come to be known as the self-improvement industry.

It is vital to understand the self-positioning of the individual that strives towards makeability in society. The (media) consumer, in this analysis, is a conflicted market player, who, above all, tries their best to take control over their elusive life in order to cope. Even though, when engaging with media, the consumer is affected by experiences beyond consciousness, phenomenology and affect studies often make it seem as if the spectator are a mere *passive* receiver, as if the confrontation with media simply overcomes them. Rather, I have argued that the consumption of media starts with what I have called the cognitive intention; a conscious decision to engage with a certain (cinematic) medium to fulfill a certain desire, whether that be a cozy night of feelgood comfort films to make you forget your stressful day, a high school sleepover night filled with horror films to share the frights, or – again, again – watching solutionist instructional videos. The actual manner in which someone experiences a film, as seen through theory of affect and phenomena, differs from the conscious supposition in the spectating subject, but still, the two strains of media understanding can continue to exist side by side. Out of frustration of not being able to finally move ahead in the Neoliberal society, the spectator's objective desire keeps overruling consciousness of the *actual* subjective experience. The imagined desire or goal is a pre-supposed factor that contributes to the experiential

²³ The original text in German reads: 'Medien, die sich ganz der Aufgabe widmen, die informierte Nation durch thematischen Dauerstress im Dasein zu halten. Die Nation ist ein hysterisches und panisches Informationssystem, das ständig sich selbst erregen, sich selbst stressieren, ja sogar sich selbst terrorisieren und in Panik versetzen muß, um sich selbst zu beeindrucken und um sich, als in sich selber schwingende Stress-Gemeinschaft, davon zu überzeugen, daß es sie wirklich gibt.'

output of a film, since it strongly contributes to the phenomenological horizon (to which I deliberately referred as “Horizon of expectation”) and even directs the transcendental intentionality that hovers over the screen. The initial conscious/cognitive choice to engage with a medium (and the control that the remote gives us) is the nutrient basis for Stanley Cavell’s skepsis, which allows us to for instance enjoy parody or spoof films. Independent from the “actual” cinematic experience, we allow ourselves to become engaged with a pre-established notion of the form and its additional rules. As indicated through Daniel Frampton’s theory, which notes that the intentionality of film is dualistic (one’s intentionality of the film, and the film’s intentionality of the presented spectacle), my argument is that the overall experience *within* the spectator is dualistic as well: a pre-conscious, receiving experience, which lingers *behind* the active engagement that the spectator uses to decide to consume a certain medium. The dual strain is also what eventually allows us to still experience free will, even when it seems obstructed by a deterministic economic fate, as we have seen in Daniel Dennett’s theory and *Survival Skills*.

Attributing an understanding to a film always starts with the intention with which the view(s)er enters it. Whereas the great cult director John Waters noted that you can only appreciate “bad taste,” if you understand “good taste” and see what and how they are riffing on it (cf. “John Waters: Good Taste and Bad Taste”), so too can we only appreciate a spoof film if we first understand that it *is* a parody and secondly if we know the tropes of the genre that is being spoofed. This conscious intentional attitude has to be adopted by the spectator, which forms the horizon that has such influence on the affective reading of a film. Simply put, a spectator doesn’t *suddenly* see a film before them, but makes a choice in what they want to watch, and for what reason.

In whatever form it is cast, media are forms of art that require *consumption*: it holds no effect as an independent entity, even though art is often being glorified as just that: a self-contained means for theoretic reflection. Even when an renowned contemporary poet like Durs Grünbein notes that ‘art is the greatest antidote against any ideology’ (cited in De Boever 29; my translation),²⁴ he holds on to a Romantic definition of the term, seeing it as inherently progressive. Gradually over the last two hundred years, art and media have become more prominently embedded within ideological structures and for commercial goals. Art *can* be a strong counter reaction against a dominant ideology (think of violent literary works by Kathy Acker and Elfriede Jelinek or disillusioning films by Lars von Trier and Julia Ducournau), but it can also be thoroughly embedded within it: think of how most influencers and content creators nowadays include sponsorships and advertisement in most anything that they produce. For consumers of sundry media, a distinction between so-called High Art and pop culture, but just as well the distinction between independent and commissioned content

²⁴ The original cited text in German reads: [that] ‘Kunst das grösste Gegengift [ist] gegen jederlei Ideologie.’

may not always be that evident. I certainly agree with the possibilities that Walter Benjamin saw in the spectatorship position when watching a film, where he noted that ‘in the cinema, the critical and the enjoying composure of the audience coincide’ (Benjamin 33; my translation),²⁵ but Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* has shown us how incredibly powerful film can work as a tool for propaganda. Nowadays, it is thanks to the abundance of media and the narrowed suggestion of internet algorithms that so many people are currently lured towards conspiracy theories and reject the set institutions of democracy. Thus, I would suggest that today our consumed media truly have become Walter Benjamin’s “aestheticization of politics.”

The conscious choice to engage with a medium in order to pursue a certain goal does not mean that we have the subjective power to reach this goal. Especially in the Neoliberal logic, you are encouraged to look for self-improvement, but at the same time the system requires you to fail to secure its own continued existence... The cognitive side of spectatorship is subordinated to the phenomenological and affective reading of experience, but humans are stubborn animals and will always convince themselves of the ability to obtain subject positions. Desire and failure go hand in hand, not only in that the one often follows the other, but also in the sense that they distort our overall (wishful thinking) experience. And at the same time when we engage with self-help-oriented instruction videos: hope keeps fueling us, even in the Neoliberally induced transsubjective depression, and fueled by “cruel optimism,” we keep carrying on.

But if we keep on persevering as we do, if we keep on “bouncing back” resiliently, the chain will never be broken. Yet this remains a rather foreseeable future, because the subjugated no longer recognizes Neoliberalism as an ideology, as we have seen George Monbiot put it, so dominant has its logic become. Slowly, the psychopolitical power has led us to believe that indeed “there is no alternative,” and quietly we keep on going, aided by the encouragement of the instructional media industry, without putting up great resistance, until we will inevitably fall down...

This pessimistic notion of deterministic inevitability is however merely a cognitive problem of misunderstanding. As seen with Daniel Dennett, the principle of free will already occurs in the acknowledgement of pluralistic future outcomes. Out of the subject’s notions of Self and understanding of the technological limitations of the (media) apparatus, we are able to see the level of responsibility that every person carries within their thoughts and actions. As in the dualistic approach to media, a person’s engagement with a deterministic belief system starts with the approach they take towards it. The objective of the instructional mode is that it provides a certain promise, if and only if the other party follows it closely. This has created narratives of obedience. Are

²⁵ The original text in German reads: ‘Im Kino fallen kritische und genießende Haltung des Publikums zusammen.’

we to understand our own level of intentional agency, then we would be able to break free from these narratives.

Quinn Armstrong's film *Survival Skills* shows us the form and tone of instruction videos, yet it at the same time mocks the obedience that it strives for in its audience, with the character Jim continuously opening up new, alternative time-lines thanks to the acceptance of personal agency over determinism. This is possible thanks to the Dennettesque acceptance of multiple possible futures *within* the deterministic narrative, turning it into a compatibilist principle, which gives the individual a sense of freedom. *Survival Skills* shows the will to adhere to social standards, but the responsibility of the Self to not let it lead to Sartrean "bad faith." There always remains free will, because there always remains a (hopeful) notion of principle Self within the individual, even if it is being obscured and regardless of Gilles Deleuze's flux identity.

Recognizing one's Self is hard to do. Gabriel Marcel's thinking shows us that the modern individual is inclined to objectify the Self purposefully, willingly adopting the Cartesian mind-body doctrine. We approach the subjective Self as a technological obstruction that can be fixed through life hacks and instruction media. These have become so dominant in our media consumption because of this psychopolitical encouragement. We misrecognize the Subject, not as a rusty social construct, but as an achievable goal for those who want it badly enough. The dream is to be the "makeable man," to become the "self-made man," but as no new subjectivity is formed, each individual remains the "malleable man," not acquiring new human capital mass, but merely re-kneading what was already there...

In the end, the great power of instruction videos and overall skill-teaching media is the imagined (false) hope that they infuse, keeping the malleable man naively hoping for subjectivity, yet remaining the subjugated.

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The photograph on the front page was taken by myself in May, 2022.

It depicts the side of men's wear store “Verslun Guðsteins Eyjólfssonar” in Reykjavík, Iceland.