The Missing Piece of Labor in a Posthuman World: The Case of "Zima Blue" (*Love, Death + Robots*, 2019)

SERGIO J. AGUILAR ALCALÁ

In the midst of the pseudo-apocalyptical situation of the second decade of 21st Century, where science is elevated to the new religion of biopolitical control, people like Elon Musk and other CEOs of big companies are raised as "visionaries" who, with the help of AI, virtual reality, exploration of space, automatization of labor, anthropomorphizing of robots, Big Data, Neuralink, etc., will lead us to a new era of humanity.[1]

One critique to this landscape says that no matter how much we connect with the machine, how much robots will look or act like humans, there will be a "fundamental core" of humanity somewhere, the "essence" of being human that no machine can account for (sometimes called "creativity" or "human spirit").[2] For psychoanalysis, especially for Lacanian thought, things are very different. There is no "essence" of humanity, we are not humans because we have something animals or machines do not have. We are subjects (subjects of signifier, since we inhabit language) *because* we have something missing: there is a constitutive lack that creates the human subject.

In today's cinematic landscape, there is an interesting place to reflect upon this perspective on subjectivity: *Love, Death + Robots* (LD+R, 2019), an animated science fiction (sci-fi) anthology Netflix series. Each of its 18 episodes was created by a different animation studio, but the series is not only a catalogue of many animation techniques: it is also a presentation of many of the common themes of

[1] See the recent work of Žižek (*Hegel in a Wired Brain*) and De Vos for deep critiques of our neuroscientific era.

[2] For an account of this debate (human essentialism against AI), see the first chapter of De Vos.

SERGIO J. AGUILAR ALCALÁ holds an M.A. in Communication (National Autonomous University of Mexico). This work was completed during an Andrew Mellon Grant for a post-MA fellowship at Universidad Iberoamericana for the international project "Extimacies: Critical Theory from the Global South." He is a member of the Mexican Permanent Seminar of Film Analysis (SEPANCINE), and the Lacanian Center for Psychoanalytic Research (CLIP). His research interests are film theory, film philosophy, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and digital cultures. sergio.aguilaralcala@gmail.com.

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the sci-fi genre (i.e., time travel, post-apocalyptical futures, etc.). Among its episodes, there is one that is particularly striking: "Zima Blue" (directed by Robert Valley), about a journalist who interviews a mysterious artist about to reveal his final masterpiece. As we eventually find out towards the end of the episode, what the artist aims at with his paintings is labor itself, in the most "pure" and "simple" sense: he states that he just wanted "to extract some simple pleasure, from the execution of a task well done" ("Zima Blue," 00:08:30-00:08:35). From a Marxist point of view, it is worth noticing how the artist combines "pleasure" and "task," for labor goes in this same direction: capitalism creates a specific subject when creating a surplus from labor. This is a way to understand the special link between psychoanalysis and Marxism: those disciplines do not focus on something that is there, but on a missing piece that is constitutive of the subject (of the unconscious, of capitalism).

In this essay, I analyze the "Zima Blue" episode with key theoretical tools from psychoanalysis and Marxism: specifically, sublimation, lack, loss, *objet petit a*, subject, labor. Additionally, I reflect on the relationship art and labor have with the void that constitutes subjectivity (from a Lacanian standpoint). When confronting neuro-scientifically informed technological projects (such as Elon Musk's Neuralink[3]), and the naive idea that we are building "a global community" with social media platforms,[4] the point is not to question where is the "human essence," but what will still be missing. The analysis of this episode might provide some insights and tools to answer a much more complex (yet unavoidable) question: not where humanity will be, but what will still be missing in our post-human world.

Closer to the Sky or to the Sea?

Let us start with an introduction and brief description of "Zima Blue." Every episode of LD+R starts with the same three icons after the series title: a heart

[3] Neuralink is the scientific and corporativist project, leaded by Elon Musk, that is developing technology for curing bran diseases, and also stablishing interfaces between human brains and AI. More information on its website: neuralink.com. Elon Musk himself, despite investing millions of dollars in it, has adverted the dangers of not controlling enough this technology (see sevenfigurepublishing.com/2016/06/03/elon-musk-dont-want-turn-house-cats/).

[4] See this account of the many characterizations Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg has used to explain what Facebook is: www.theverge.com/2019/3/8/18255269/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-definition-social-media-network-sharing-privacy

(*Love*), a letter X (*Death*) and a robot head (*and Robots*). After this, three other icons referencing key concepts of each episode (in *Sonnie's Edge*, a heart, an X and a snake; in *The Secret War*, two skulls and a soviet star). The only episode where the three additional icons are the same is "Zima Blue" (ZB): three identical squares. This gives us a clue that it is a different episode from the rest of the series, differentiated by *repeating* the same icon.[5]

Fading from a black to a blue screen, a ship crosses the frame from left to right (Figure 1). Inside it is Claire Markham, a journalist summoned to speak with the mysterious artist Zima through a blue printed invitation: "I couldn't decide whether the blue was a closer match to the sky or to the sea. Neither really. Zima Blue… it was a precise thing." She could not tell where the blue belonged, to the sky or to the sea (Figure 2): this is an indeterminacy of perception, i.e., an impasse brought by the limitations of our bodily senses. Note that the invitation says that any recording device is forbidden: you cannot take any "proof" of the meeting, other than the memory of what will be seen and heard there.[6]

Claire tells us the story of Zima, an artist who grew bored with working on portraits and wanted to travel to as many places in the universe as possible to find new inspiration. Sometime later, he presented the mural of a landscape, with an important detail that was never before seen in his work: there was a tiny blue square, like a hole, in the middle of it.

He continued his landscaping murals, maintaining that tiny blue shape (sometimes a square, sometimes a triangle, sometimes a circle), which was getting bigger every time, until he revealed a mural which was all blue. This was not the limit yet: each new canvas was bigger and bigger, until a whole planet was painted in blue.

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[5] A very interesting dimension of analysis that I cannot take into consideration in this work (for it would mean a very big digression) are the similitudes and differences between the short film and its original source of adaptation, the homonymous short story by Alastair Reynolds (included in the compilation *Zima Blue and Other Stories*, 2006). Nonetheless, I left some footnotes pointing to key passages or elements from the short story which I think can open different and new fields of discussion and analysis.

[6] In the short story, Claire Markham is named Claire Clay, and she is a several centuries old journalist who needs a memory assistant robot to record and store everything she sees and hears. This robot is prohibited to meet with Zima. Certainly, memory is a very special theme of discussion between Claire and Zima, as well as a theme of the whole short story.

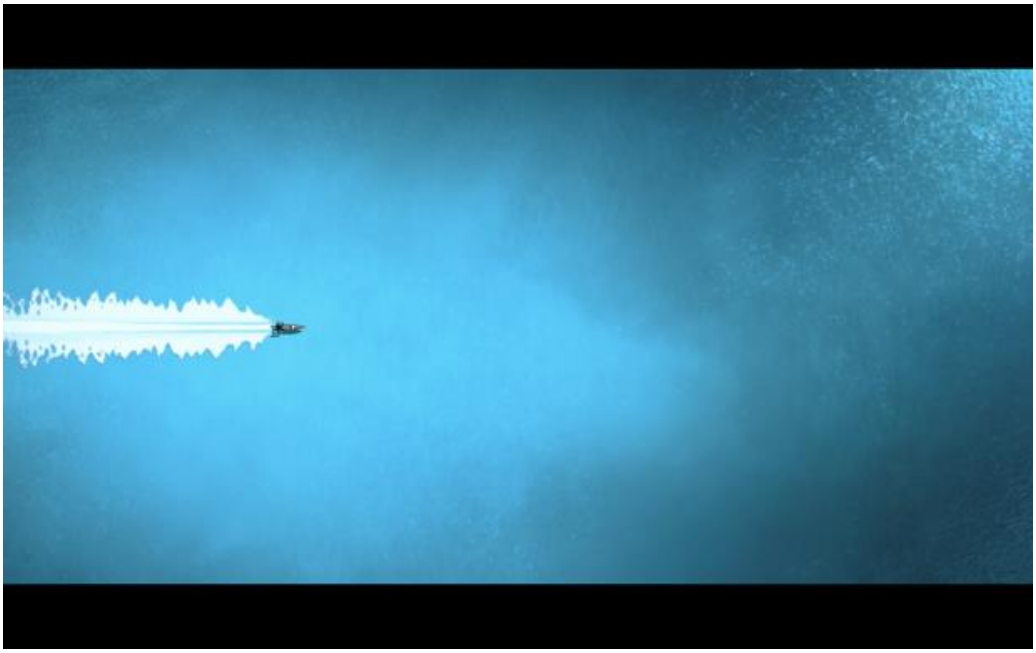

Figure 1. Still from “Zima Blue” (00:00:40)

Figure 2. Still from “Zima Blue” (00:01:00)

Claire gets to the dock of Zima's studio, and finally meets him: Zima is a sort of black, tall, flat, ageless man. He is not wearing clothes, yet he does not seem to be naked: his skin does not look human. Her voice-over continues the story: Zima underwent several surgical procedures to make his body resistant to extreme environments. This enabled him to travel through many worlds, to discover the truth of the cosmos.

"My search for truth has led me here, to what will be my final piece" ("Zima Blue," 00:04:54-00:04:57), Zima says to Claire upon arriving to the construction of a swimming pool. The artist tells the story of this particular swimming pool: it belonged to a woman, who was specialized in practical robotics.[7] She created many robots to help her around the house, and one of them was dedicated to clean the ceramic sides of the swimming pool. She kept improving it, giving it a visual processor so the machine could find the best way to clean the pool. With each updating, new software and hardware, the machine became "more aware" of itself and its job, the task it was designed for. One day, the woman died, but the next owners kept adding more modifications, so the machine "became more alive, became more me" ("Zima Blue," 00:06:16-00:06:23).

Claire realizes Zima was telling his story: he was a machine that became human, not the other way around, as Claire told us previously. She cannot believe it, and Zima confesses that it is difficult even for him to understand what he has become, "and harder still to remember what I once was." This is an indeterminacy of temporality, i.e., of the causal and sequential chain of events: Zima seems sad for being unable to say with confidence what he was. He reveals the origin of his name: Zima Blue is the name the manufacturer gave to the little blue tiles the machine was once dedicated to clean, "the first thing I ever saw" ("Zima Blue," 00:06:54-00:06:56).

It is important to notice that the pool Claire sees is not a pool Zima reconstructed from his memories. He does not dig a hole in his studio and build a pool there, rather, he extracts the original pool and moves it to the studio. As I will mention in the next section, the quality of a hole Zima transports from another world is reflected here quite literally, but a hole is also what art is about (at least from a psychoanalytic perspective).

[7] A change worth taking into account: in Reynold's story, the original owner was a young boy who became famous in the beginnings of Silicon Valley; in the short film, it is a black woman.

At this point in the short film, the great question has been partially answered. We know what the square represents: it is the tile the artist used to clean when he was a mere machine, and because of this task, he started to acquire a sort of self-consciousness and free will. But, why did he keep drawing the blue hole, until his canvases were all blue? To answer this, we must look at what psychoanalysis can tell us about art.

Zima's Blues: Subject, Lack, Sublimation and Art

Lack is the *sine qua non* condition that enables human subjectivity to exist. In psychoanalytic theory, lack is not about looking for what we don't have (what we are lacking), but about what we have when we lack something. The lack itself carries something else. As Alenka Zupančič (47) explains, human beings, insofar as they are speaking beings, inhabit the world of signifiers, a Symbolic order which is never complete: there is no ultimate signifier that guarantees a whole signification, there is always a hole in the signification process. This hole is not a "stain" or "imperfection" in our Symbolic order, but constitutive to it: for a Symbolic order to exist, there will always be a hole in it. That is why humans are not only subjects without something, but subjects with-without: they carry a constitutive hole, and this hole "has consequences, and determines what gets structured around it" (Zupančič 47).

A way to understand this lack as constitutive of humanity is to look at the problem of identity. Humans are beings denied of a stable or natural identity: there is no "true Self" beneath the surface of my interactions with the others, beyond my actions and words. I cannot be spontaneously, but only in a reflective way: think of people who talk out loud a command during a difficult task, or people who write positive messages in front of the mirror to see them every morning; they are behaving in a reflecting way, as a kind of separation within themselves. For Jan de Vos, humans are humans in a reflective way because they conceive themselves as potentially other: "the human subject not simply is, but rather imagines its being, precisely through the act of imagining itself as different" (3-4). Thus, humans do not have an identity lost, modified or perturbed by social interaction: it is the interaction with others, and through identification, that I acquire an identity and a "lost, natural" identity I had, or that was denied to me.

The common saying that "we don't know what we have until we lose it" is turned around in psychoanalysis: when we lose something, we don't "realize" its

true value, but we meet the weight of the loss (Darian Leader 7). This loss explains why humans make marks (from doodles on paper and writing on walls "I was here," to tattoos, removing the eschars we get from accidents, or even the practice of 'cutting'): it is a way to leave a controlled trace of the trauma of lack, of the trauma left on us by the void constitutive to our universe of language.

For Leader (45), mark is the zero degree of human narrative. Marks are not the traces of an exciting story, but a way to deal with contingency, a way to put crutches in reality to fix it, to make a meaning out of it, and art is a privileged place to see how marks provide the point of entry into the psychoanalytic account of human subjectivity.

The primary lack in our subjectivity opens a perpetually unfulfillable void, an empty space doomed to be momentarily covered by any object we put in it. During *Seminar VII* (dictated in 1959-1960), Jacques Lacan gave this void a proper name: *das Ding*, the Thing, not an object, but an empty place several objects come to occupy. The process of raising an object "to the dignity of the Thing" is called "sublimation" (*Seminar VII* 112), i.e., the process of elevating an object to the sacred position of an object that will fulfill the (unfulfillable) void. Thus, in this schema, art is the process of elevating an object to represent the constitutive lack of subjectivity: "Art provides a special place within civilization to symbolize and elaborate this search" (Leader 75).

This is quite an interesting approach, because art would not only be a series of works, none of them able to account for the constitutive void, but this series of works are about the impossibility of fulfilling this structural void. Art is not just a failed representation of reality, but the representation of failure, an (yet another) effort of fulfilling the void that *das Ding* opens. This is why many artists repeat their work over and over again, where repetition seems to be the theme itself of their art: in painting, Willem de Kooning's paintings of women, Francis Bacon's screaming popes (both studied by Leader 146-153), Yves Saint Laurent's almost two hundred *IKBs* (more of that ahead); in cinema, Takashi Shimizu's multiple versions of *Ju-On*, Woody Allen's repetitive characters (played by himself in many of his films), Stanley Kubrick's obsession in repeating shots dozens of times, Oliver Laric's multiple versions of his video-art *Versions*. Just as Zima's blue holes may change their shape and size (triangles, rectangles, circles, huge canvases), what matters is not the semblance, but the structural repetition of the hole.

We see this structural repetition of the hole in Zima's canvases with blue holes. Instead of asking why is Zima painting the same blue canvas over and over again,

how big does he want them to be, what is he wishing to accomplish, we must see a structure that is not incomplete, but complete in its incompleteness. Such is the structure of desire: for psychoanalysis, desire is primarily, and most importantly, the desire to desire: "[desire] is caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the desire for something else" (Lacan, *The Instance of the Letter* 431). In other words, as Leader has explained, "Since desire is a state that involves the lack of an object, the idea of satisfying desire with an object is a contradiction" (87). Desire cannot be satisfied by any object, because its function is not to make us desire something, but to always keep desiring. It was because of this insight of what desire aims at (i.e., to keep desiring) that Lacan changed the status of *das Ding* to what he called the only invention he made: *objet petit a* (little object a), the object-cause of desire.

The Lacanian *objet petit a* enables us to understand what Zima is painting. He is longing for a primordial blue that started his desire in the first place, the object that caused his desire to start functioning: a desire for desire itself. This void is the structural reason there is a chain of objects of desire: they all try to fulfill the basic hole of each subject. As Diana Chorne has argued (638), from a psychoanalytic perspective, art is a certain way to organize this hole. The many objects of desire (new canvases, paintings, films, and everything our commodities capitalism offers us) function to try to obfuscate the hole (created by the Symbolic order itself) that prevents the completeness of our subjectivity.[8]

Yet, since this hole within subjectivity is what allows subjectivity to exist, and desire is the process of trying to fill this hole with many different objects of desire, the subject believes it had an object and then lost it (when in fact, there was no primordial object in the first place). Such is the way Slavoj Žižek (*Melancholy and the Act* 659-60, emphasis in original) characterizes the structure of melancholy:

> the mistake of the melancholic is not simply to assert that something resists the symbolic sublation but rather to locate this resistance in a positively existing, although lost, object. In Kant's terms, the melancholic is guilty of committing a kind of paralogism of the pure capacity to desire, which resides in the confusion between *loss* and *lack*: insofar as the object-cause

[8] To be discussed in a different paper is an important detail in Reynold's short story that was omitted in the short film. The blue stain in the paintings had as an origin a mistake, a Freudian slip, on Zima's part: it was involuntary painted over an almost finished canvas. Zima says in the short story: "The effect was electric. It was as if I had achieved a short circuit to some intense, primal memory, a realm of experience where that colour was the most important thing in my world. […] that colour spoke to me, as if I'd been waiting my whole life to find it, to set it free."

> of desire is originally, in a constitutive way, lacking, melancholy interprets this lack as a loss, as if the lacking object was once possessed and then lost. In short, what melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is *nothing but* the positivization of a void or lack, a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself. The paradox, of course, is that this deceitful translation of lack into loss enables us to assert our possession of the object; what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss.

We can see this in the blue of the tiles Zima "lost" and is desperately trying to recover, each time in a more extreme way. The blue murals are a way to possess the blue tile again, and the sense of purpose he once had so clearly defined. As he was becoming "more human," given more anthropological features and "self-awareness," his melancholy was created: his humanity started the moment he perceived himself as incomplete, as having a lack, and the problem of humanity, as the previous quote explained, is that this lack is considered a loss: we think we had something and we lost it, but the problem is that subjectivity started precisely because something is perceived as already lost, and not as always lacking.

The way this hole manifests in the artwork is by showing that art is not the gap between the actual object (a hill, a person, a table with food) and the representation of the object in a canvas (landscapes, portraits, dead nature paintings). Art is between the representation of the object and the position we are looking at this representation. Art includes our own position, from which we look at it.

This is particularly clear in the Lacanian approach to the practice of anamorphosis. The painting analyzed by Lacan (*Seminar XI* 92) is Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533): when looking straight at it, we can see the two persons and objects around them, but there is a stain in the middle; we have to put ourselves in a special position in order to discern that this stain is a skull, but when doing that, we lose the ambassadors. This painting is not only a representation of two men, but includes our own position as spectators, a mark inscribed in the painting: "Le tableau, certes, est dans mon œil. Mais moi, je suis dans le tableau" ("The picture, it is true, is in my eye. But as for me, I am in the picture"; Lacan, *Seminar XI* 89). Gérard Wajcman (34-5) explains, as translated from the original French:

> what strikes first is that, instead of looking at the picture as the representation of something, of a world, of a landscape, of an object, of a

> story, Lacan is occuppied in looking at the mark of an observer, a subject. […] the question of the picture, for Lacan, is that of locating the relation of the subject to the world.

This blind spot that the practice of anamorphosis spectacularizes is what Lacan identified as the gaze: the point from which the subject sees her/himself inscribed in the object itself, i.e., we can find the relation of the subject to the world in the object itself. Our visual field is not "pure," but constructed around this blind spot, this stain which obstructs its "completeness." For Bracha L. Ettinger (49), when discussing painting in general:

> The painting touches us in a dimension which is beyond appearance. […] The painter engages in a dialogue with the lacking object and therefore, according to Lacan, something of the gaze is always contained in the picture. But the viewpoint of the gaze is my blind spot: I cannot see from the point from which I am looked at by the Other, nor from where I desire to be looked at.

The important thing here is that this stain is not just something we always have in our visual field, but it is the result of the construction of the visual field itself: "The world can retain a consistency for us not because society says that certain things are taboo or need to be covered up, but because they actually cannot pass to the level of visualization or even ready imagination" (Leader 154). There is a hole constitutive to the visual field, and art consists in finding new ways to deal with this hole.

The gaze, as this stain whose introduction destabilizes the art work's consistency by introducing the observer, creates what Gottfried Boehm (246) calls the "indeterminate" characteristic of pictures. The indetermination is not at the level of "metaphorical meaning" (what surrealism is famous for), where the indetermination is the gap between meaning A or meaning B, but at a deeper level: the basic indetermination is the gap between a meaning or no meaning at all. A case Boehm studies is, curiously enough, Yves Klein's own "blue period."[9]

In 1957, Klein registered a specific shade of blue (now called International Klein Blue, IKB) as a trademark color, and painted 194 canvases with it: canvases painted solely on blue. The catalogue for an exhibition in that same year described these paintings as "disengaged from all functional justification" (TATE). At the same exhibition, 11 of these blue paintings were displayed to buy, each with a

[9] Worth noticing that Yves Klein is mentioned in Reynold's short story, unlike in the short film.

different price. This move would put him in a fine line between "shamanism and commercialism […] both a spiritual and a marketable activity" (as the TATE index card characterizes it). For Boehm (351-2), the indetermination of these works is in the fact that they are a visual continuity almost never interrupted: there are no reference points, no coordinates to locate ourselves, they are atopic paintings.

Klein's paintings inhabit the gap between the existence of meaning and no meaning at all. This is what a mark is, as explained by Leader before: a point, a trace we make to make meaning out of contingency. Perhaps this is what Zima Blue's work might actually mean: a mark, a way to point and trace the moment he felt was constitutive of his subjectivity, of his humanity, the moment he was opened to the abyss of his own freedom. As Klein, Zima went beyond representing something to represent the absence of something to be represented. However, there is a big difference between Klein's blue period and Zima's blue period: the latter goes to an extreme limit in the engagement with his artistic vision.

Closer to the Ground or to the Cosmos?

After telling his story to Claire, the moment of the revelation of Zima's last work has arrived. Lots of people are gathered to see the artist's new piece. The pool is full of water, and Zima throws himself into it. We hear his voice: "I will immerse myself. And as I do, I will slowly shut down my higher brain functions, unmaking myself, leaving just enough to appreciate my surroundings, to extract some simple pleasure from the execution of a task well done. My search for truth is finished at last. I'm going home" ("Zima Blue," 00:07:46-00:08:46). As we are hearing this, we see how his body is shutting down and slowly tearing itself apart. Among his sophisticated parts, the primitive cleaning robot emerges and starts to clean the walls of the pool, to the shock of the audience.

The penultimate shot is a black screen, with a blue square (the pool), with a tiny black square in it (the cleaning machine), evoking Zima's murals (Figure 3): people watching a huge monochrome canvas with a tiny hole in it. We find here a third indeterminacy, one embedded in the *mise-en-scène* and frame composition, because even though we know we are looking at the pool from above, the pool seems to be in the sky (with the camera flashes as the stars in our galaxy): is the pool closer to the sky or to the ground? The final shot is the machine crossing the blue frame from right to left, as a mirror of the first shot (Figure 4).

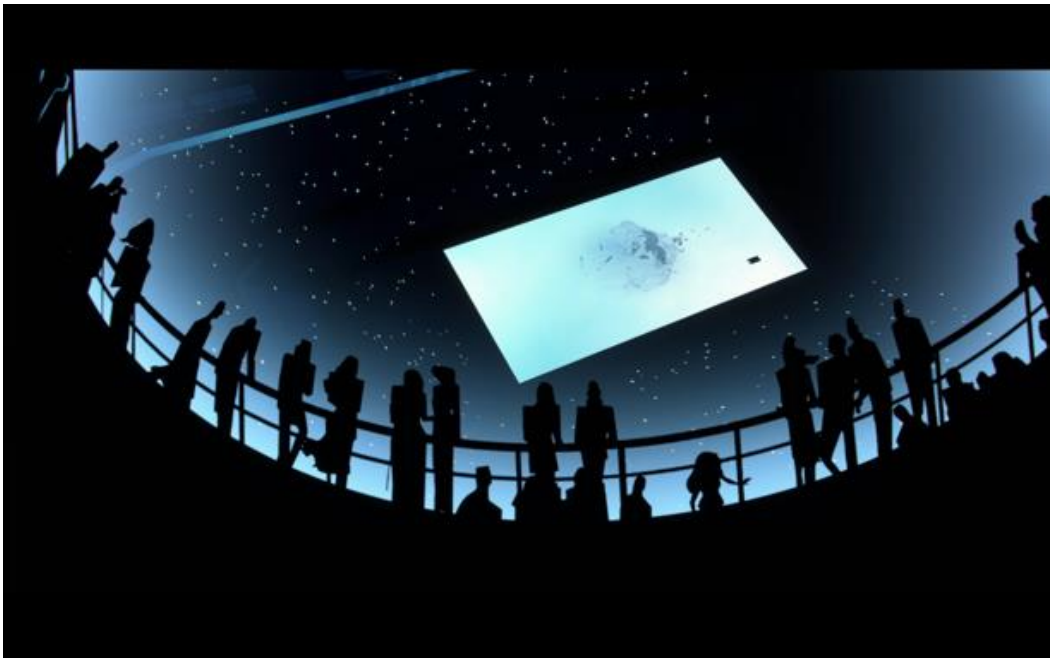

Figure 3. Still from “Zima Blue” (00:08:47)

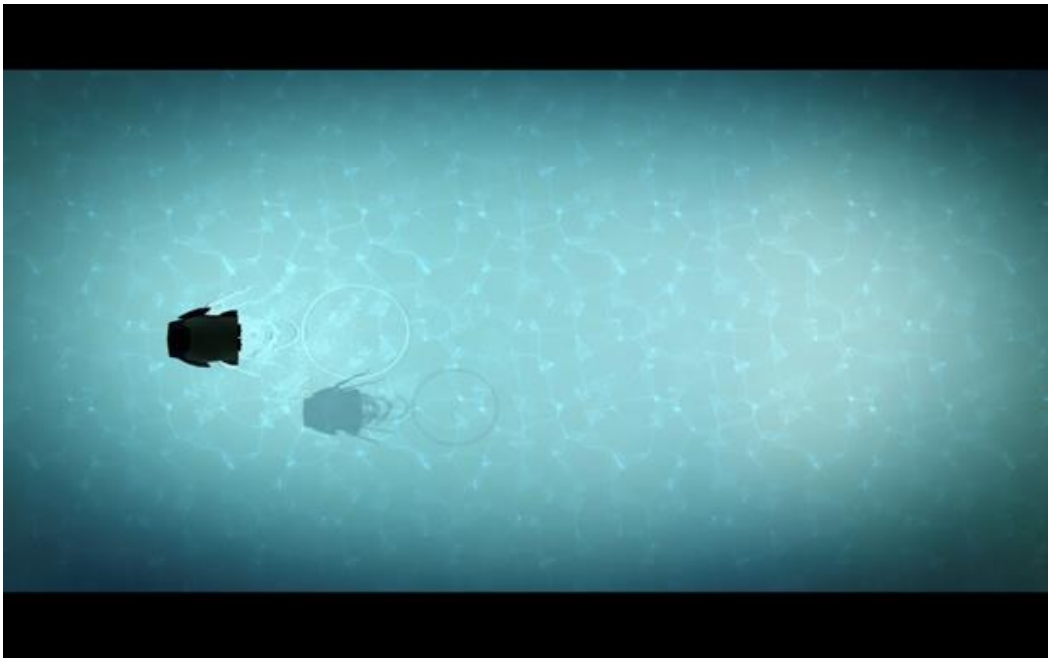

Figure 4. Still from “Zima Blue” (00:08:53)

The first indeterminacy presented, by Claire, was of the order of perception: is it blue like the sky, or blue like the ocean? And as an indeterminacy of perception, it dwells in the present: it is now that I cannot see which option is better. The second indeterminacy, however, is proper to subjectivity, for it is a narrative of the subject's history (Zima): am I a robot that became human, or a human that became a robot?

The question if Zima is a robot or a human is not an ontological question (what am I?), but a logical question, concerning the logical time as Lacanian psychoanalysis understands it: "one can only recognize himself in the other and only discover his own attribute in the equivalence of their characteristic time" (Lacan, *Logical Time* 170). It is a time that cannot be understood separately from the narrative experience of itself: time exists because we have a (hi)story of time. This (hi)story achieves its effects via (an)other person who functions as the big Other (the written or implicit set of rules that regulate society). Thus, there is no "primal, original Self" who interacts with others: there is a sense of Self because we see (an)other person (who stands for the big Other).

It seems clear why Zima wanted Claire to help him get his record straight. Claire is a journalist, a profession dedicated to account for stories and facts. But why has Zima asked her not to bring any recording device? Because he does not care if "people" read his story (the pool, that he was a robot, etc.): he wants to tell his story to the big Other, to speak it out loud. Claire Markham is someone whose ears will function as a mark for Zima, a trace to help him deal with the traumatic thing he is about to do. Claire is the mark that signals that the big Other knew his story, whether this big Other is named Claire or whatever other name.[10]

This mark is what we find in our third indeterminacy. Now it is not a matter of perception (for we know we are looking at the pool "from above"), nor a manner of stories (for neither Claire nor Zima are mentioning it). It is the gaze: this indeterminacy inhabits the proper domain of the picture. It seems like there is a hole in the sky, Zima has been extracted. In what consists the simple pleasure he

[10] Is this not what happens in a psychoanalytic session? Whatever we say within the confinements of the couch "stays there" (in the sense that the analyst will not tell anyone about it), and at the same time, it produces a deep effect in the analysand, for it was said, it is not where it once was (within ourselves). That is why the analyst erases itself as another person, and embodies the big Other: in psychoanalysis, we are not talking to Claire, Jacques or whatever name our analyst has, we are talking to the big Other. Or as Claire Clay says in Reynold's short story, reflecting on her encounter with Zima: "I know now why he spoke to me. It wasn't just my way with a biographical story. It was his desire to help someone move on, before he did the same."

extracted from the execution of a task well done? Let us review what Marxism can tell us about it.

Some Simple Pleasure from a Task Well Done: Subject and Labor

To inquire what kind of pleasure Zima gets from executing a task, we can take a proper Marxist point of view to work and consumption of goods. It is already in the beginnings of Karl Marx's work where we can see the problems of separating the production of commodities from their consumption. In *Grundrisse* (89), written in 1857-1858, he stated: "Thus production, distribution, exchange and consumption form a regular syllogism; production is the generality, distribution and exchange the particularity, and consumption the singularity in which the whole is joined together." That is, all production is already consumption, and all consumption is production. If we isolate the consumption process from the chain of production, we hide its essential quality for production to exist. Marx continues (91):

> Consumption produces production in a double way, (1) because a product becomes a real product only by being consumed. [...] (2) because consumption creates the need for new production, that it is creates the ideal, internally impelling cause for production, which is its presupposition.

This is one of the most radical inversions, among others, in Marx's work. Capitalism is not a system where commodities are produced to consume them, but a system where commodities are consumed in order to produce them. Capitalism is interested in consumption only if the consumption enables more capitalist production. As Keti Chukhrov (1) explains, this is why Capitalism has invented new forms of consumption, characterized by a consumer who does not consider her/his activity as consumption of commodities, but ways to "express" or "reinvent" her/himself, a consumer who is engaged with the act of consumption as a means to affirm its subjectivity.[11] What Chukhrov means is that, in the capitalism of commodities, we believe we are "expressing ourselves" when we are consuming, and therefore, capitalism adopts to any agenda of expression of subjectivity if, and

[11] Consider the metallic straws replacing plastic ones for the sake of "saving the planet"; designer clothing manufactured in Third World factories for the sake of "diversity," now use transgender people in their advertisement: when we think of such practices as "efforts" from the companies in order to be more "green" or "inclusive," we focus on the semblances of production (the type of plastic or the diversity of the model), and not in the consumption-production circuit itself.

only if, it continues the circuit of consumption and production. Even if we believe we are only relaxing or having fun, in the capitalism of commodities we are doing so only under the condition that we are consuming and producing through our consumption.

Thus, Capitalism is not a system where we can find a true distinction between work and leisure, between producing and not-producing.[12] As the capitalist alienates a surplus from the worker's labor, the worker is alienated in the capitalist mode of production and consumption: even though the worker lives in a world created by its labor, this world is out of control, nonetheless, the worker complies to it and finds pleasure in the very activities that perpetuate the system of its own exploitation.

One of the most important consequences of alienation is, therefore, that the worker is always producing, always socially useful, even in the activities "not designed" to be useful, or not normally seen as work. For Herbert Marcuse (46), "In the 'normal' development, the individual lives his repression 'freely' as his own life: he desires what he is supposed to desire; his gratifications are profitable to him and to others; he is reasonably and often even exuberantly happy."

With Marcuse, we can arrive at an important point for this discussion. Alienated labor is perfectly capable of producing pleasure for the individual when he/she gets a "job well done":

> The typist who hands in a perfect transcript, the tailor who delivers a perfectly fitting suit, the beauty-parlor attendant who fixes the perfect hairdo, the laborer who fulfills his quota — all may feel pleasure in a "job well done." However, either this pleasure is extraneous (anticipation of reward), or it is the satisfaction (itself a token of repression) of being well occupied, in the right place, of contributing one's part to the functioning of the apparatus. In either case, such pleasure has nothing to do with primary instinctual gratification. To link performances on assembly lines, in offices and shops with instinctual needs is to glorify dehumanization as pleasure. […] To say that the job must be done because it is a "job" is truly the apex of alienation, the total loss of instinctual and intellectual freedom —

[12] One of the best introductions for the study of how Capitalism collapses the borders between what is productive and what is unproductive is Alfie Bown's *Enjoying It: Candy Crush and Capitalism*.

> repression which has become, not the second, but the first nature of man. (Marcuse 220-1)[13]

Marcuse's ideas are echoed in Žižek's work: "far from being a direct expression of my creativity, labor forces me to submit to artificial discipline, to renounce innermost tendencies, to alienate myself from my natural Self" (*Less than Nothing*, 203). Labor, thus, is what introduces a peculiar cut within myself, inside of me, and the alienation is the process this cut becomes useful for production, especially when I see this cut to enjoy, to have pleasure, or to reinvent myself.

The problem is that pleasure, desire, and the fulfillment of desire are not "natural" activities, upon which we spontaneously find satisfaction. Insofar as we speak, human beings are alienated from the natural satisfaction other animals, perhaps, achieve. If there is a fundamental lesson of psychoanalysis it is, for Lacan (*The Signification of the Phallus* 581), that desire is not a naturally given measure, previous of any Symbolic identity conferred upon any pseudo-natural subjectivity. In any case, desire offers a way to invent the necessity of desire itself.

This approach to desire is an introduction to the differences between psychotherapies and psychological treatments versus psychoanalysis. We can enumerate many of them, but an essential one is this concept of desire as a forever unachievable desire, due to a traumatic, primordial lack. In other therapies, the subject creates a narrative that makes its path through life a little bit "better," clinging to a concept, and object, an idea, that could embody its singular "story." This process of creating a story for my past, to understand my present and direct my future, a mantra known for psychotherapies, a washed off version of psychoanalysis, is the attempt to erase a trauma that permitted my subjectivity to exist (see again the aforementioned Lacan, *The Signification of the Phallus* 581). There was no "authentic me," no "true Self" that suffered from some trauma: I am what I am because of trauma.

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[13] To understand the implications of Marcuse's apex of alienation, we can see a contemporary example: the case of Mexican airline Interjet: at the moment I'm writing this, the company is apparently on the verge of publicly announcing its bankruptcy, with salaries not being paid to workers for months. Nonetheless, those same workers hanged up a tarp in Mexico City's airport by November 2020 saying that even though the company has not paid their salaries, "out of respect" for the passengers, they are still working. And they even blame the government for making it impossible for the airline to pay the salaries, when it imposed a tax verification and sanctions due to lack of tax payments for years. A few weeks later, they officially declared a strike when the airline was unable to continue operations. See (in Spanish) a summary of facts here: elpais.com/mexico/economia/2021-01-11/el-fantasma-de-la-quiebra-acecha-a-mas-de-5000-empleados-de-interjet.html

This brings us closer to the core issue of the episode: what is "to extract some simple pleasure from the execution of a task well done," as Zima describes his actions while tearing himself apart ("Zima Blue," 00:08:30-00:08:35)? As explained in the beginning of this paper with De Vos (3-4), since human beings are inhabitants of a Symbolic order, they are not "spontaneously" humans: being human is always to pretend to be human, to wear a masquerade of human "essence," to be human "in a reflective way." We can recognize here an abyss of freedom proper to humanity: since we are not "naturally" humans, we are "condemned" to be utterly free to define what humanity is.

Therefore, the proper human act is not just to act freely (animals certainly do that). A proper human act is to freely negate this freedom, as when a legislator or a president passes a law that he/she does not personally approve because "it's the representative of the People's will," or parents that punish their child "for her/his own good." Here is how we abandon the weight of the abyss of our freedom by declaring ourselves as mere instruments of some big Other, by following the orders from our superego (the agency in charge of complying to the Law).

It was clear for Lacan that this subordination to the big Other was not as simple as the common cliché we hear when someone complies with the duty "because it is the duty." The superego is not just looking for compliance to the Law, but a certain pleasure it can get from this compliance, so it can extract some simple pleasure from the execution of a task well done (the task of "educating" our child, the task of serving to the People's will, the task of complying to the Law). A machine cannot get pleasure from executing a task, because only humans can find pleasure in freely subordinating to their task. This type of pleasure is what Lacan called *jouissance* (enjoyment[14]), and the most important order our superego gives us is not just "Follow the Law!," but "Enjoy!" (see Lacan's *Seminar XX* 3).

Thus, enjoyment is not an innocent, natural satisfaction, but the compliance with the Law that commands the desire to desire. As Žižek (*You May!*) sums it up: the superego works by an overlapping of two zones, "in which the command to enjoy doing your duty coincides with the duty to enjoy yourself."

We can read why Zima's last act before returning to his previous state (a simple cleaning machine) is a proper human act: once he gained access to language and humanity, he was lacking, he became a subject with-without, and this abyss of

[14] He insisted, in front of an English-speaking audience, that there is no proper word in English to translate the implications of *jouissance* (see Lacan, *Of Structure*, 194). Nonetheless, it is common that translators use both enjoy (when it is a verb) and *jouissance* (when it is a noun).

freedom was just too much for him. Human freedom is not to "free ourselves from Destiny, but to freely choose a Destiny that must be fulfilled."[15] Even though he goes back to this pre-human state, he acts as a proper human: he freely chose to go back to the Destiny he was programmed to fulfill.

Conclusions: A Really Boring Dream

The fantasy that neurosciences proposes is of a world driven by scientific knowledge. This world is only possible if we consider subjects as cold machines, manipulated by what scientists say they have "found" in our brains, like Robert Stickgold, a neuroscientist interviewed in Netflix's *The Mind, Explained*: he complains that, when people find out he studies dreams in machines, they want to tell him about an interesting dream they had, and he finds their accounts boring. This naïve investment in scientific objectivity is the obverse side of the "cunning of Reason": reason is not invested in anything else but its own presupposition. Louis Armand has explained (18):

> It is no accident that discourses of post-humanism necessarily engage with a certain humanistic tradition, whether it be called "enlightenment," "scientific rationalism" or — seemingly paradoxically — "technologism," and what we might call the "method" of knowledge, certainty, truth; in short, the very *technē* of human understanding. In this view, the human is regarded not as the instigator of particular technologies, but as a prosthesis of technology. (18)

This particular way to deny our subjective investment in order to reflect upon "post-humanism" is something we cannot be indifferent to. A different account on human freedom that recognizes desire as a singular lack of the subject (such as the Lacanian approach proposed here) might become a powerful tool to destabilize the discourses that neurosciences, in articulation to capitalist investment (for example, what we see in Neuralink and Elon Musk[16]), use to approach human subjectivity.

In fact, Elon Musk (quoted in Urban) has stated that the problem is precisely the "degree of freedom" that AI can get when it "surpasses" human intelligence. But here we must ask: what notion of freedom is Musk referring to? Is it a notion that considers the liberation from chains a goal of freedom, or is it a notion that

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[15] This approach to human freedom is developed by Žižek (*In Defense of Lost Causes* 316).

[16] See neuralink.com/science.

considers the singular assumption of chains a way to express the proper human freedom?

What a short film like "Zima Blue" encourages us to do is not to look for "more freedom" (which, in the capitalism of commodities, is only the "freedom" of the market), but to confront and deal with the subjective responsibility of being utterly free to decide the chains that will tie us up.

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