

## Fast Forward Nation

If you use the fast forward button, the action speeds up. Details are lost, but certain relationships and actions become visible that are otherwise not noticed. For example, if we fast forward through a famous movie such as Polanski's *Chinatown*, we can see that the antagonist cop and ex-cop, Lou the lieutenant and Gittes the private eye, can be seen walking together "entrained," as the psychologists say. That is, they are walking together in lockstep, like men on a military parade. But this lockstep phenomenon is not noticeable when the movie is watched at normal speed. It is there and it is not there at the same time. It is visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious, an order without any conscious planning.

Ostensibly, the two men are rivals and even enemies. They once worked together, we learn, but now one has stayed with the police force, while the other got out and started a business as detective, and while Gittes the private detective has, as one of the cops puts it, "done well for himself," Lou the lieutenant, who stayed with the police, has also done well for himself, becoming lieutenant and climbing the ladder of authority. Each dislikes the other. The lieutenant dislikes and envies the private eye Gittes, and Gittes looks down on the lieutenant for working in the low-class district with its petty criminals and sordid crimes of an impoverished and desperate part of the community: what Gittes has escaped.

The two men are hostile to each other, too, because they are involved in the same case, and each sees the other as meddling and concealing and naively being implicated in the case in ways that neither is smart enough to understand. Interestingly, in the shocking final scene, the two divide the final words of the action (with some intervention by Gittes' assistant). They are "entrained" again, at the end.

While they are envious and hostile and in conflict with each other, still, they are seen walking together lockstep, imitating and conforming to each other's movements. Clearly, more unites these two men than divides them. Without knowing it, they literally walk together in the valley of death. The two men are the same, but, truth to tell, they hate each other.

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"Object Thinking" is a concept I develop in two books of mine, entitled *Male Envy* and *13 Ways of Looking at Images*. By "Object Thinking" I mean a way of visualizing reality. It is a way of understanding reality, but "understanding" usually refers to an abstract process of intellection, and what I mean is something much more sensory and emotional. "Visualizing" means "seeing with the mind's eye"—the form/trans/forming of mental images—not, in other words, abstractly thinking about things. And what Object Thinking shows is a *model*, a way of visualizing the world. In this model, reality appears as a vast collection of material objects in space, objects that are outside the self and that can be measured, quantified, and located in a fixed framework of space. All things have location, in other words. What holds these material objects together is the impersonal laws of nature.

In precisely parallel fashion, human society is visualized in the same way: as a vast collection of individual persons held together by the impersonal laws of the market, by the need to use one another in certain ways. For Object Thinking, there is a close synchrony and isomorphy between the laws of nature and the laws of the market. This isomorphy goes back to the first important attempts to understand capitalism in the eighteenth century. Thus Edmund Burke pronounced in his *Thoughts on Scarcity* (1795) that the “laws of commerce” are “the laws of nature,” and “the laws of nature” are, in turn, “the laws of God.”

What Object Thinking shows us is that everything is separate from everything else. Every person is separate from every other person. In the precise formulation of Jacques Derrida, who was a classic Object Thinker, “*tout autre est tout autre*”—“all other is all other”—or, more exactly, everything is separate from everything.

Object Thinking begins with the triumph of capitalism, and with it, the emergence of modern science, as the system of measuring and controlling nature, the objects of which nature is composed. The first great Object Thinker, then, was Descartes, and with Descartes comes the classic problem of philosophy over the last several hundred years, since the triumph of capitalism and the emergence of modern science, namely the problem of “perceptual acquaintance,” as it is sometimes termed. To put it in the form of a question, What is the difference between inside and outside? What is the difference between what is inside us and what is outside us? And by “inside the self” I clearly do not mean “*les petites cellules grises*,” as Hercule Poirot puts it, the neurons, veins, organs and fluids and bones that are found when you open up a body. I mean, of course, our subjectivity, our so-called “inner life,” and by outside the self I mean that very domain of objects in space that I referred to a moment ago—material things spread out in an ever-widening vastness of space.

This is the so-called “subject-object” relationship, and it is, as I said, the basic problem of Western philosophy from Descartes to, I suppose, the present. No philosopher has figured it out. How can two radically different “substances,” to use the Cartesian terminology (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*), be in contact with each other—the subjective domain of consciousness, which can hardly be said to occupy space, and the domain of material objects spread out around us “outside” the subjective domain somehow containing it, just as, somehow, our subjectivity is “contained” by our body. It must be emphasized that the subject-object relationship is, in practice, a variation on the fundamental relation of Object Thinking, namely *person-thing*. The relation of person to things is the functional, day-to-day, routine form of the philosophers’ “subject-object relationship.”

There is a logical problem with the philosophy of the subject-object relation, and that is that if we begin by assuming that subject and object are outside of each other, so to speak, we are never going to be able to connect them without disposing of our assumption of separation. “*Tout autre est tout autre*” must become “*tout autre c’est la même chose*.” The weakness of Object Thinking is that it depends upon a medium. That is, the subject-object relation, which governs all relations in Object Thinking, actually has an invisible third member: it is subject-*space*-object. The object is separated by a space from the subject. What is inside is separated by a

space from what is outside. And indeed, to be an object is to be isolated in space, to be isolable in space, so that reality is a sequence of separations made possible by space.

Space, however, is a problematic concept. What is space? No one knows. Space is visualized, in so far as it can be visualized, as a container, as the inside of a container. But what is a container that has no walls, no containing reference points? The notion is inherently unintelligible, even if it is somehow intuitively familiar.

As long as the spaces of the earth were remote, the conviction that everything is separate from everything else made a certain kind of sense, especially under the regime of capitalism. For capitalism in its expansive phase in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the profits could be collected at home, and the source of those profits, mainly in slavery, forced labor, and the plunder of India, could be safely regarded as on the other side of space, so to speak—separate. Not here. Not where the subject is, the subject who “consumes” and enjoys the profits of that violence. This person-thing relation forms the model for every relationship in the regime of capitalist culture.

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If we press the fast forward button we witness the collapse of space. By speeding up what we see, distances condense and vanish, space contracts. One point is closer to another point. To travel faster is to shrink space. It is to make things more evidently and obviously connected, interconnected, aspects of a single thing, as the two men in Polanski’s great film *Chinatown* become parallel men sharing the same rhythm and to that extent being two nodes of a single identity, united even though they hate each other.

The primary implication of space, of Object Thinking, of the subject-space-object paradigm, is *hostility*. What is outside us is not us. It is not who we are. It is, in our mind, less than we are. It is set over against us, and while we may be dependent upon it for our existence, we are not it, we are separate, and our task in this life is to control objects in space, to use them. And in this way of thinking, other people must be understood not as recognizable subjectivities, but as objects which either threaten us or that offer advantages to us, if we are smart enough and powerful enough to make use of them. We are in a hostile world. We are in a contested world. Space is *a field of aggression*, a space of contestation, an arena, in which we must attack, dominate, control, and use what is outside us. We must “consume” it.

In particular, it is assumed that the primary relationship with others is a hostile one. We either use others or are used by them. We either control others, or they control us. It is true that we can form alliances with others and share the results of our control-power, but our purpose in such alliances is to dominate and control others whom we are allied against, and even our allies are allies only in so far as we have negotiated control with them. They are allies because they have something that is useful to us and we are strong enough to win a certain place in the alliance.

The assumption that we are hostile to others and to our world is surely the governing assumption of capitalist social relations, no matter how much love we may feel for certain others

or how much appreciation we may feel for the natural world, no matter how good we may feel toward our employees, boss, or banker.

But the obvious truth is that we have far more in common with one another than anything that divides us. This is most obvious in the case of sheer survival, because humanity has now reached a point where destroying others inevitably means destroying oneself; to destroy the object is to destroy the subject who destroys. And what the era of global communication increasingly demonstrates is that space is relative, not absolute. Nothing is really separate. We are connected and connected and connected. We are really one nation as we are one species, and that species is one of many species which all have more in common than they have with non-living nature. We are one species as we are one earth, and at last, perhaps the human race is beginning to realize this fact. The world “shrinks to an immediate whole,” as the American poet Wallace Stevens puts it.

But to realize the fact that we are indissolubly one and that nothing is separate is so anxiety-arousing that to confront this truth is to risk death. It means confronting all the anxieties and fears accumulated from the past, with its obsessive belief in difference, that the utter difference of others means our insecurity, means hostility and threat to survival. The age of global communication has thus produced what my teacher, the great Canadian intellectual, Northrop Frye, called “a hell of unparalleled hysteria.” The realization of interconnection has produced a crisis in every aspect of human existence, including religion, which typically visualizes the divine as “God” understood as the ultimately other, the ultimately *separate*. Thus the ultimate anxiety that God is “absolute other” must be allowed to express itself before being discarded, for if God were indeed absolute other, there is no way we could even know of God’s existence, in whatever form we conceive the divine: God would be merely nothing if God were indeed “absolute other.” But once this “absolute otherness” disintegrates, the truth that the divine, however we choose to constitute the divine, is part of ourselves and part of nature, and not more absolute other than anything or anybody is absolute other, or than the two men entrained with each other in the fast forward movie of *Chinatown* are absolutely other, even if they, like men who do not know themselves, think they are.