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A digression from Pil and Galia Kollektiv's "The Institute of Psychoplasmics"

One of the characteristic features of Unix is the architecture of its kernel. While previous operating systems employed an explicit monitor process which governed all other activity, the Unix kernel is, in some sense, a virtual process. In technical terms, it is executed procedurally through system calls made by user processes. The kernel has no independent existence as a process. While described precisely by code ("text" and "data") it is dynamically constituted by other processes.

Jumping domains to politics, there is an argument referred to as "deep anarchy" which asserts that the state does not exist. The state is a virtual entity, constituted by codes of law, other abstractions, and by people behaving in statist ways. The mechanisms of the state are constituted dynamically by individuals. Without them the state has no independent existence.

Finally, Jacques Lacan asserted, as part of his elaborate psychoanalytic theory, that there was something called the "big Other", and that, furthermore, it did not exist. The "big Other" represented the regulation of law and order, the guarantor of symbolic order and validity behind society. In an equivalent argument to the "deep anarchy" discussion, he asserted that it was only through the beliefs and actions of individuals that the big Other appeared to exist.

Taking these three cases, I want to argue that there is an underlying architectural structure in common to all of them, which is also shared by the mind.

The idea that consciousness is a distinct, persistent process separate from the unconscious mind is not required to explain its apparent continuity. All that is necessary is for the parallel processes of the brain to constitute the elements of consciousness when necessary. Thus the possibility of ideas appearing in consciousness from the unconscious, or of decisions being made unconsciously. The constitution of waking consciousness is virtual, brought about by a collection of coordinated mental activity. Thought operates like the parallel processes of Unix or the individuals in society, only occasionally making itself conscious (i.e. visible to phenomenal consciousness).

The existence of a codified state which is inert and only brought to life by the actions of autonomous processes is precisely paralleled in the architecture of the Unix system (kernel executed procedurally by processes), the state (mechanism operated by citizens), Lacan's big Other (laws and conventions observed by individuals) and of the brain (mental structures being codified by synaptic connections and activated through cascades of electrical activity). Across each of these systems there is a static continuity of (legal or software) code or text on one hand, and a dynamically constituted function on the other. In the case of consciousness, this approach explains the seeming paradox that the contents of consciousness change from moment to moment and yet we feel a sense of persistent identity.

For those who are still unconvinced by the analogy, a further set of parallels can be drawn between the memory model of a programming language such as Unix's C and the models of abstraction created by Lacan and others. Inevitably sharing a certain amount due to their common function as frameworks within which symbols are created and manipulated, the similarities are nonetheless surprising.

According to Lacan's three registers of perception, the Real is the basic level of perception, ungraspable in its entirety, from which events are abstracted into the forms and images of the Imaginary. The contents of the Imaginary are connected by language into more complex conceptual

structures in the Symbolic register. This process is largely unconscious.

In C, on the other hand, the "real" is binary memory storage. Within this real, particular extents of bits can be abstracted into "images" (this is in fact the technical term for a raw set of bits, as in the term "disk image") and then interpreted as having particular "symbolic" form or value (for example as integers or characters). This symbolic value then exists within the linguistic structure of the C language. This process of abstraction and resolution is mostly hidden, handled "unconsciously" by the syntax and semantics of C.

If this parallel has been noted before from one side (Unix hackers) or the other (Lacanian psychoanalysts) it will, I'm sure, have been dismissed as banal. Each group is naturally inclined to see the other's work as "trivially", "obviously" conforming to their understanding of the world. It is hard to judge the value of this kind of semiotic analysis.

What I am arguing is that these systems -- Unix, the state, the mind -- not only share the rational structure of semiotics but have the same processual architecture. This is the architecture of the Unix kernel, or of the state as described by the theory of deep anarchy. It is a parallel architecture in which an overall controller or director is constituted by a text which is executed by multiple autonomous processes as part of their functioning. The kernel/state/conscious mind is virtual. Going beyond vague discussions of the machinic unconscious and abstract machines, this is an account of a machinic brain which manifests a (virtual) conscious and a (concrete) unconscious part. In some sense all mental activity is unconscious from a third-person perspective.

Pil and Galia Kollektiv's exhibition *The Institute of Psychoplasmics* addresses the functioning of the collective unconscious in its expression through cults and abnormal psychology. The titular Institute appeared in a David Cronenberg film as a place where the unconscious issues of patients were encouraged to express themselves in physical form. One of the the themes of the work in the exhibition is the idea communication between the conscious and the unconscious mind. This communication appears to be generally inhibited by the calcified structures of habit, which some of the artists in the show seem to suggest should be broken or modified.

Indeed, a common feature of cult indoctrination is the "breaking" of new recruits to remove the certainty of their old beliefs. Learning to communicate with one's own unconscious is not dissimilar to joining a cult. In extreme cases, such as schizophrenia, the unconscious will begin to express itself explicitly through voices or hallucinations. Whether these voices are helpful or harmful must vary from case to case. The voice of the unconscious is, at least, not imposed from outside.

Stanislaw Lem's book *Solaris* describes a situation in which a sentient ocean on an alien planet begins to interact with the scientists who study it. The book is laden with imagery of the subconscious, not least the ocean itself which continually morphs through elaborate changes of state. Significantly, the ocean appears to read the minds of the visiting scientists and confronts each of them with a solid hallucination of their deepest unconscious fixations. The interpretation made by the scientists is that the ocean is sentient, that is attempting to communicate with or experiment on them. However it could equally be asserted that the ocean is merely an advanced piece of machinery which fulfills their unconscious desires. This distinction between sentience and unconscious mechanism is always ambiguous, even among humans, except in the reflexive case (each of us presumably knows that they, themselves, are sentient).

Solaris provides a lens through which to examine the wider implications of the Institute of Psychoplasmics.

Bearing in mind the declared focus on cult groups, the central issues must include morality, politics and consciousness. Morality because cults frequently abuse their members through manipulation.

Politics because of the role cults play as political units and as parts of a larger society. Consciousness because of the undoubted effectiveness of cult recruitment and brainwashing tactics.

The unconscious subsumes each of these categories. If subjective hallucinations are understood to be the product of an individual's unconscious, then objective reality can be seen as the product of our collective unconscious. Solaris' ocean amplifies subjective hallucinations to the point that they become living, breathing organisms. Similarly, cults amplify belief to the point that it begins to create reality. The reality within a cult is defined and constituted by the collective behaviour of the cult members. As suggested by the first part of this essay, behaviour can be seen as being directed by a code or text, and the members of a cult have all chosen (or been convinced) to agree to the same text. If the cult leader is following a different, self-serving text, as must so often be the case, abuse is taking place. Equally, this equates to political disenfranchisement and is tantamount to mind control.

If objective reality is produced by the collective unconscious, as I have suggested, in what ways might we all be seen to be living in a cult? Is the state, the "big Other", the kernel, not simply a text to which we have all subscribed? Cults may simply be a special case of normal human behaviour. The assertion that we can change the text and create a different society is the basis for all revolutionary movements. Cults provide a positive example that the text can be changed, but at the same time they indicate the possibilities for undemocratic, abusive texts that operate at an unconscious level.

Solaris' ocean, like the techniques of Cronenberg's Institute, looks into the unconscious and produces solid, living beings. In a sense we already live in that world, as collectively we reproduce our reality from unconscious processes and desires. Only by becoming more aware of our individual and collective unconscious can we hope to change those processes and thereby change the structure of society.